

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOSICKS

「ゴシックエス」

Ⅲ 秋の花の思い出

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GOSICKS

角川ビーンズ文庫

GOSICKs

—ゴシックエス—





混沌の欠片を愛おしむようにもてあそぶ。

埋もれた恋物語の裏にある謎を。

くだらない退屈を少しでも
癒すために、少女と少年は語り合う。

白い薔薇と紫のチュートリップと黒いマントラコラと
黄色のエーデルワイスと
その裏側に隠された真実と嘘と恋。

「うん！ あれ、どうしてわかったの？」

「混沌さ。再構成だ。」

「くだらんことだ」

風が吹いて、花壇の花々と、

一弥の前髪を揺らしていった。

遠くで鐘が鳴り始めた。

午前中の授業が始まる時間だ。

「おもしろい話を持ってきたまえ」

ヴィクトリカは言う。

「それと、花もだ」



くじょうのすけ
久城 一弥

極東の島国よりソングール王国に留学してきた。心優しい優等生。堅物で正義感に溢れた、重人一家の三男。

ヴィクトリカ・プロウ

毒物・甘いお菓子・フリルを愛する。謎多き天才少女。図書館塔最上階で膨大な書物を読むのが日課。



グレイヴィール・ド・プロウ

ヴィクトリカの異母兄で、地元警察署警部。色男だが、普段はなぜかドリの様な奇怪な髪型をしている。



アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談好きの美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



セシル先生

一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童顔の女性。

CHARACTERS

ソフィ

聖マルグリット学園の寮母でセシル先生の友人。

コルデリア・ギャロ ヴィクトリカの実母。

ブライアン・ロスコー 謎の人物で毒物師。

GOSICKs

— ゴシック エス —

イラスト / 武田日向

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Shahrazad perceived the dawn of day and ceased to say her permitted say. When it was the Thousand and First Night—the final chapter of this book—she resumed once more.

One Thousand and One Nights

Prologue

The deep-blue night hung heavy over the garden. A late-summer breeze, cool and damp, blew against the little dollhouse that stood in the corner of the garden, surrounded by a maze of flowerbeds.

“We...”

“We will never part...”

A mysterious whisper, husky as an old woman’s, helpless as a small child’s, came from the bedroom of the dollhouse, blending with the wind that rustled the flowers in the flowerbeds.

“Kujou...!”

Everything here was a size smaller, from the brass cathead doorknob to the green door and the French windows. The furniture inside the house was tiny and lovely as toys—the emerald couch, the art nouveau cabriole-legged table, the flower-shaped lamp. Piles of old books filled the floor and table. A pink, half-eaten macaroon lay on the floor. Chocolate bonbons wrapped in red cellophane glowed in the darkness like eerie will-o-the-wisps.

“Get away from me, or I’ll end your life,” came a husky, lonely voice from the bedroom.

“I’m in an awful mood, yes.”

“...I can.”

“Nothing is impossible for a Gray Wolf.”

There was a faint rustling of clothes, like a kitten turning over in bed, and the sound of sleep-talking.

In the bedroom was a small and luxurious canopied bed. A girl was sleeping on the silk sheets, her magnificent golden hair spread out like a glittering fan. She had a small face, with perfect and beautiful features, as though crafted by a master. If it weren’t for her breathing and the occasional opening and closing of her tiny hands, it would have looked like an exquisite porcelain doll had been placed there. Her cherry lips slightly parted, and the girl—Victorique—kept mumbling.

“Forget... about Grevil.”

Her white muslin nightgown had layers of ruffles, each one embroidered with a different floral pattern. Roses, violets, tulips. But each turn lifted the ruffles up, until eventually her smooth belly, fair as porcelain, and navel were exposed.

“Achoo!” Victorique sneezed.

“It’s cold.”

“Close the window.”

“Hey, Kujou.”

The bedroom was filled with silence. Victorique’s small, shapely nose twitched in anguish as though she was having a nightmare. She mumbled something, then fell into a deep sleep again, her belly still exposed to the cold.

The gardens were quiet. The deep-blue night sky turned darker. Morning was still hours away.

“Achoo!”

Chapter 1 [Purity]: A Tale of White Roses —France, 1789—

Summer was ending, slowly giving way to autumn.

One morning in St. Marguerite Academy.

The late-summer sun, milder than it had been just a few days ago, was shining brightly on the campus modeled after a French-style garden. Morning dew still hung on the foliage, glistening as they trickled down. Birds chirped in the distance. A few squirrels scurried in random directions across the lawn and disappeared into the shadowy forest.

On such a quiet morning, there was someone walking briskly through the campus. It was an impeccably-dressed Asian boy, wearing his uniform's necktie properly. His jet-black hair bounced as he walked, hiding and revealing his eyes, black as his hair, and a little moist.

The boy—Kazuya Kujou—walked along the smooth gravel path and stopped at a corner.

A huge and complex flowerbed maze in the shape of a square lay in front of him. Built by a professional gardener, it was a strange place—once you stepped inside, you'd get lost and have a hard time getting out.

Kazuya sighed. "It's not like Victorique to catch a cold. She's tiny inside the layers of ruffles and laces, but she's pretty tough, mean, arrogant, and demonic." His voice lowered. "I'm a little worried." He hung his head.

Then he lifted his head up, and without hesitation entered the flowerbed maze with the same brisk gait.

Flowers of various shapes and colors—red, pink, orange, cream—were in full bloom, glistening wet with morning dew. He walked down the flowery path, keeping his eyes straight. He turned right, left, right, then right again. His lips were pursed tight.

"This flower's pretty," he mumbled as he looked at a tiny golden flower.

His cheeks flushed in embarrassment at his own words. Then his face turned serious, and he resumed walking.

After making it through the seemingly-endless maze, Kazuya arrived at a small, two-story residence that looked like a candy house. He was about to knock on the green, toy-like front door, but then changed his mind, and approached the front-facing window on the ground floor.

“Victorique?” he called hesitantly.

“...”

“Good morning, Victorique.”

A faint groan came from inside, a voice as husky as an old lady’s, but somewhat anxious. Kazuya frowned. He put his hand on the window and opened it.

“Victorique,” he began in a firm voice. “You haven’t been answering me properly lately. Why is it that when I talk to you, you don’t even say a single word? Since spring, I’ve been wandering all around the place for a selfish princess. And I’ve been talking every single day until my voice grow hoarse.”

“Hmm?”

“The effort is unbecoming of the third son of an imperial soldier. Are you listening? How’s your fever?”

“Hmm!”

Opening the window gave him a good view of the room. A tiny cabriole-legged table with matching chairs. A magnificent dresser adorned with numerous jade-green ornaments, and a massive chest. On the table lay an untouched breakfast—a salad of fresh fruits, bite-sized raisin bread, and a silver pot of tea.

Kazuya couldn’t see Victorique, the tiny, frightening owner of the room, so he leaned forward and looked around. Suddenly a tiny golden head emerged from under the window and stopped just below Kazuya’s chin.

Kazuya looked down.

He saw a hair whorl. He poked it with his forefinger, giggling. There was a displeased growl. A tiny figure, puffed up in a white ruffled nightgown, wriggled sluggishly on the luxurious, emerald couch. It was like looking at a flower with golden petals and white leaves. A lovely scent came from the layers of ruffles, as though infused with fragrant flower oil.

“Stop poking a sick person’s head,” said a grumpy voice. “You’ll end up in hell.”

“A little poke does not warrant that. Anyway, how’s your fever?”

The golden head looked up at Kazuya. Her long, magnificent hair, like strands of golden silk, reached all the way to the floor, stirring like some creature's tail. Her tiny pale face was somewhat swollen from the fever.

Mysterious, deep-emerald eyes that seemed to suck in everything, were staring at Kazuya, eyes that could have belonged to an elderly woman or a young girl.

Her glossy cherry lips parted. "I have a fever!"

"I see," Kazuya said, disappointed. "So you're not feeling well. That's unusual. I guess it's because a lot happened on the train on our way back from the monastery."

Kazuya had just returned to St. Marguerite Academy with Victorique a few days ago. On the morning of the last day of summer break, Victorique had somehow ended up locked up in Beelzebub's Skull, a monastery by the sea. When her brother, Inspector Blois, told him that she was debilitated, Kazuya headed to the monastery with frills, laces, candies, and books to rescue her.

After rescuing Victorique, they returned to the academy aboard the Old Masquerade, a luxury, transcontinental train. After dealing with various incidents thrown at them, they managed to return home safely, but because of the fatigue, Victorique had been listless for the past few days, and she wasn't going to the library like she always did.

When Ms. Cecile told him that she had a fever, Kazuya immediately came for a visit.

"I'm about to head to class, but I thought I'd at least check up on you," he said.

Victorique snorted. "Pointlessly diligent as ever, I see."

"Yeah. I'm pointlessly diligent... Now, wait a minute. That's no way to talk to someone who came to check up on you."

"You're virtuous and simple-minded. I'm sure you have some stupid candy in that bulging pocket of yours anyway."

"I do. How did you know?"

"Chaos. Reconstruction. Trivial stuff."

Victorique yawned wearily. She laid down on the green couch, her golden hair enclosing her. It seemed as if her tiny body was shining from within. Kazuya felt a renewed sense of reverence for his friend's beauty, something he should be familiar with already.

Too bad she's so mean when she opens her mouth.

Victorique regarded Kazuya with a yawn. Jewel-like tears formed in the corners of her eyes, glistening like the dewy golden petals he saw earlier.

"Hurry up and take it out already," Victorique grumbled.

"Hmm? Take out what?"

"What's in your pockets."

"Oh, right." Kazuya shoved his hands in the pockets of his uniform.

"Actually, I thought you might be bored, so I was thinking of bringing you an interesting story, or flowers that are blooming in the conservatory since you haven't been there in a while. But I figured snacks were enough for now."

"Oaf."

"I'm glad you like it. Wait, did you say oaf? You mean me?"

"I don't see anyone else around."

Victorique turned away as she munched on a flower-shaped cookie that Kazuya had given her. She was ignoring him. Her ruffled nightgown had shifted to the side, revealing a milky white, tiny shoulder.



“I am not an oaf,” Kazuya protested.

“Then bring me an interesting story too.”

“F-Fine.”

“And flowers.” Victorique said, glancing back at him as she devoured the cookie.

The wind blew, rustling Kazuya’s hair and the flowers in the flowerbed.

Bells rang in the distance, signaling the start of morning classes. Kazuya watched Victorique for a moment. Victorique too was staring back at him.

The bells continued tolling.

Kazuya turned on his heels and headed back to the flowerbed maze.

Victorique looked a little sad. After about ten steps, Kazuya looked back. He thought he saw Victorique’s face lit up a bit.

The wind blew.

“Little brat,” Kazuya mumbled softly with a straight face.

“What was that?” Victorique’s golden hair bristled. “Wait, Kujou! Say that again!”

“I’ll see you after school!”

Kazuya bolted into the maze at full speed.

The late-summer sun grew even softer in the afternoon, gently casting its rays on the campus. Students, sunburned from their vacation, hurried past. As evening approached, the clamor died down, and quiet lay on the gardens. The only sound was the rustling of the foliage in the wind.

“Hmm...”

In St. Marguerite’s Grand Library, a majestic structure standing in a corner of the campus, Kazuya Kujou was groaning as he searched for something. Even the warm sunlight did not enter this cold and damp stone tower.

Kazuya was sitting in the middle of a wooden staircase that meandered up to the ceiling far above like countless snakes.

He scratched his jet-black hair, his gaze fixed on a section of the huge bookshelf.

“I think Victorique casually mentioned that she’s read all the books on this shelf and this one. In that case, maybe this shelf right here is full of books that she hasn’t read yet. I have to find an interesting topic for Victorique, and bring her some flowers too.”

Several thick books sat on the stairs.

“How about this one? Memoir of an Ordinary Nanny During the French Revolution. There’s bound to be something interesting in here... Hmm? A rose?”

Kazuya, reading the book written in French with a frown on his face, lifted his head and nodded.

“All right. Let’s go with this one. As for the flower, a white rose should do it. If I bring the same flower as the one in the story, she might enjoy it more. Yeah.”

He closed the book and tucked it under his arm. He then marched up the wooden stairs to pick some flowers in the conservatory.

Kazuya knocked hesitantly on the window. “Victorique? Are you there?” A mere snort came from inside.

“I got you a book and flowers, Miss Bossy Pants.”

Victorique, sprawled on the emerald couch as she had been this morning, gave Kazuya a spiteful look. Her eyes were hot and moist, her cheeks red as apples.

“You’re late,” she growled. “Go away.”

“There you go again.”

Kazuya propped up his elbow on the window sill and rested his chin on his hand. Clearing his throat, he handed her two pretty white roses. His face was flushed.

Victorique looked confused. “What’s this? You’re creeping me out.”

“Oh, come on. A white rose appears in the story,” Kazuya said as he wiped the crumbs off Victorique’s cheek. He showed the book to her. “Have you read this book yet? Memoirs of an Ordinary Nanny During the French Revolution: The Two Roses of Count de Jaricot.”

Victorique shook her head, her golden hair swaying in unison. Kazuya studied her small, porcelain face. He detected a slight change in her calm, emotionless features, like a light passing through the eye of a needle.

Kazuya was relieved to pique her interest, even a little.

“I am writing this memoir in Paris, in the year 1811,” he began. “For I wish to record and pass down to future generations the tragedy that befell two beautiful roses during the revolution, including what I saw and heard at

Count Jaricot's home. This is the story of a lovely girl, Vivienne de Jaricot, and her uncle, Antoine, both executed by guillotine."

Victorique nodded. "Go on."

Kazuya straightened himself, then continued reading.

A soft, evening breeze blew.

Flowers swayed in their beds gently, as though reminiscing about days gone by.

I am writing this memoir in Paris, in the year 1811, for I wish to record and pass down to future generations the tragedy that befell two beautiful roses during the revolution, including what I saw and heard at the House of Count Jaricot. This is the story of a lovely girl, Vivienne de Jaricot, and her uncle, Antoine, both executed by guillotine.

It was the summer of 1789. The city of Paris, France, known as the City of Flowers, was stained with blood.

Paris before that day was gorgeous. Beautiful palaces. Lovely ladies in their luxurious dresses with whalebone corsets. The nightly *l'amour courtois* of the aristocracy, who flitted through the bright night like colorful butterflies, chasing fleeting dreams that would vanish in the morning.

Meanwhile, the people were starving. Back in those days, the country was governed by an *ancien régime*, with the clergymen on top, the aristocracy second, and then us, the working class. My family, who lived in the downtown area, could not go to school, and went to work at the age of ten. Paris was like two different countries: the noble's manors, and downtown.

A secret and modest *l'amour courtois*, different from the nightly balls of the aristocracy, was being held at the home of Count de Jaricot. This was a surprise to me, as someone who came from the residential district.

Vivienne de Jaricot, fifteen years of age, was an exceptionally beautiful young lady who was the talk of the town. She had inherited the beauty of her mother, who was said to have run away at a young age because she could not stand her husband's violence. Possessing golden hair and large, mature black eyes, she spent her days idly, lying on the couch like a lazy cat. She never went to a ball, nor took a walk in the Count's wonderful garden.

She could not walk for long. Only we, the servants, knew why, and we were ordered to keep silent. We spent whole days tending to the lazy Vivienne, brushing her hair and rubbing perfumed oil into her skin to make her more beautiful, as though we were polishing jewelry.

Her father, Count de Jaricot, was desperate to use Vivienne for political purposes. He sat at his desk every night devising plans. He was determined to marry off his beautiful daughter to either the royal family of a neighboring kingdom or offer her to King Louis as a concubine. For that, the Count had Vivienne, who was approaching adulthood, strapped with a vile chastity belt made of steel, with the key hidden away somewhere. The steel belt was so heavy that the lovely Vivienne could neither run nor jump, forcing her to spend her days lying on the couch with a pale face. When she walked, she walked slowly, her body rocking from side to side. Sometimes we would sigh at the heartbreaking scene, at the irony of being born beautiful, yet bound to such a pitiful fate.

But Vivienne had someone to rely on. Her uncle, Antoine, who lived in the same house. He was a young man, just a little over twenty years old, with similar beautiful features. Known in Paris's high society as the 'two roses of Count de Jaricot', he and his niece were loved by the aristocrats.

But while he loved and cared for Vivienne deeply, the young man could not oppose his guardian, Count de Jaricot. If he drew the man's ire, he would not only get kicked out of the house, but also banished from France on the grounds of committing some dubious crime. Antoine sometimes leaned against the Count's magnificent desk, pondering what to do.

Everyone in the house knew that the two roses secretly loved each other, but none dared mention it. The clandestine *l'amour courtois* seemed to envelop the manor in darkness day by day.

Victorique yawned.

"Are you bored?" Kazuya asked.

"Ahuh."

"Just wait a little longer. The revolution is about to begin, and the white roses will show up at the end. Hey, are you listening?"

Victorique yawned again, her small mouth opening wide before closing. Her ruffled nightgown stirred.

“I think I would be less bored if you sang and danced awkwardly,” she said.

“I-I’m not doing that! Frivolity isn’t really my thing. Besides, we’re in your house, not the library. Ms. Cecile comes here often. If she saw me dancing on the verge of tears, I’d be so embarrassed I’d rather die.”

“Ms. Cecile?” Victorique snorted incredulously. “I see. You’re at that age, I suppose.”

“We’re the same age!”

“Oh, shush. Continue reading.”

The wind blew again, rustling the colorful flowers, whirling their petals up.

A bird chirped in the distance.

The manor had a young maid named Roxy. A wild woman with long black hair and blue eyes, she seemed to harbor feelings for Antoine. I saw her crying and pleading with Antoine on more than one occasion. Antoine, however, only cared about his niece; he was unaffected by Roxy’s advances. Roxy grew increasingly desperate. She would comb Vivienne’s hair so roughly that the girl would yelp.

Soon the glamorous nights of the nobility and the surreptitious tension in the Count’s home came to an end. The last day of the *ancien regime* arrived like the bursting of a steadily-expanding ball. The French Revolution had begun.

When the Third Estate’s demands for reform were ignored, the people’s dissatisfaction finally reached its peak. With beacons lighting up the night, they stormed the Bastille prison to seize arms and ammunition, and ruthlessly slaughtered the mayor of Paris. The people roared with victory in a sea of human blood and guts.

One after another, the voiceless broke into the residences of the nobility and began to rob, massacre, and arrest them. Count de Jaricot, an influential aristocrat who mocked the masses’ ignorance, was no exception. He was quickly stabbed with countless bayonets and toppled on the luxurious carpet like a blooming red flower. Extravagant furnishings were destroyed and stolen, and the ‘Two Roses of Count de Jaricot’ were imprisoned in crude cells.

The last thing I saw was Vivienne, falling to the floor with a shriek as she witnessed her father's death, and Antoine's face twisted in horror as he caught her in his arms. Vivienne was dainty and thin, but the steel she wore made her so heavy that it looked like she would crash to the floor at any moment. Vivienne was dragged away by muscled revolutionaries, and I never saw her again.



At the manor's front door, Roxy was whimpering like a beast.

Roxy was a revolutionary. She was a woman, with no education nor wealth; in other words, a commoner. But she was a very intelligent girl. She would sometimes talk passionately to me, an uneducated woman, about what the Legislative Assembly was, the necessity of republicanism, and the revolution for a new world. But at the same time Roxy was hopelessly in love with a beautiful young nobleman.

She was screaming at the sight of Antoine being taken away, but the next day, with a slightly brighter face, she spoke to me.

"Have you decided where you're going?" she had asked.

We, people who lived in a nobleman's house, had lost our jobs that night and were rendered homeless after the revolution.

I shrugged. "I'm heading back home in the suburbs. Do some laundry work while I search for another job. What about you?"

"I'm going to work for the revolutionary government. We're going our separate ways, but hopefully we'll see each other again."

I was surprised that Roxy liked me. Maybe it was because I was the only one who didn't speak bitterly about her love for someone of a different status. It wasn't out of kindness or sympathy, but simply because I was a spectator in everything.

"We will," I replied. "Paris is a small city."

"Yeah." Roxy brushed back her dark hair and smiled. "I'll be stationed at the prison, watching the jailed nobles."

"What?" I stared at her face in horror.

"I want to see the dispirited faces of the people who worked us like slaves."

"Please don't be cruel to Vivienne. The poor little thing. She's from a wealthy family, sure, but that ridiculous hunk of steel had tied her down for so long. She can't even fall in love, let alone run."

"I don't care about Vivienne. I'm talking about Antoine. I applied for the men's prison."

Roxy chuckled.

The revolutionary government held trials, determined charges, and began executing aristocrats who had exploited the people in the square. It was apparently done for show to allay people's dissatisfaction that their

lives were not getting any better despite the revolution. Every morning, nobles were dragged out of prison and executed by guillotine.

I lived in fear in the suburbs, taking care of my younger siblings. I wondered when those roses would be executed. Then, one day in late summer, I learned that Antoine de Jaricot and his niece Vivienne had been sentenced to death.

Their execution was near. I was so upset that I left my family behind and wandered aimlessly through the streets of Paris.

To a small square surrounded by brick buildings. A broken fountain. Children running around. A well with dying vines. The smell of iron on the wind. Paris was stained with blood.

A woman with dangling dark hair came running from the darkness of dusk. It was Roxy. Her eyes were bloodshot. She let out a shriek when she saw me.

“Roxy?”

“Ah, perfect timing! Do you know where Count de Jaricot’s desk is?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“I went to his house, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. That night, some furniture was destroyed, and some were stolen. The desk was very valuable, so someone must have taken it and sold it. I have to find it.”

“Calm down. If the desk was sold, I doubt it’s still in France. Too many luxurious furnishings are being sold, but no one in this country has the money to buy them. I think all the expensive stuff has been taken out of the country and sold secretly. Austria, Spain, maybe England. Anyway, it’s not in France anymore. I’m sure of it.”

“But there’s a key in it! Monsieur Antoine told me so!”

“...A key?”

Roxy broke down crying.

According to her, she got the job at the prison because she actually wanted to rescue Antoine. What she said to me back then was just her trying to stay strong. Once a visionary, she had grown tired of the men’s struggle for power and a life of poverty that remained unchanged even after the collapse of the *ancien regime*. But Antoine refused to escape from prison in fear of Roxy getting arrested. Yes. Antoine was a powerless but kind young man.

When Roxy told Antoine about his execution, he said, “Please help Vivienne if you can. The key to that stupid chastity belt should be in the Count’s desk.”

Antoine had known about it for a long time, but he was too afraid of the Count’s power to set Vivienne free.

“That steel weight is a cage that confines a helpless young woman—a cage of family, of parents, of society. I want to free Vivienne at least, and hopefully it will be enough as atonement.”

Roxy agreed to Antoine’s request and left to look for the desk.

“Cage,” Roxy mumbled. “I’ve been working since I was seven. Not once did I ever think about freedom, about being a man or a woman. Nobles think about odd things, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I remembered Antoine leaning against the Count’s prized desk, pondering something. Did he know all along that the key was hidden there somewhere? Was he now regretting not taking it sooner and setting Vivienne free?

“But I can’t find the key,” Roxy murmured dejectedly. “I tried to sneak over to Vivienne, but she wouldn’t escape. She said she would die with her uncle. Poor Vivienne. She’s only fifteen years old and in prison with that heavy body. She never knew a father’s love. Not even her mother’s. I should have been gentler with her hair. I shouldn’t have hated her so much.”

“It’s too late for regrets.”

Roxy chuckled. “But the thought of her dying with Monsieur Antoine fills me with jealousy and hate. I’m not really sure how I feel about her.”

Roxy left, her shoulders sagged. I watched her powerless figure for a while. A dark-haired commoner who harbored feelings of unrequited love. How would she live in this new Paris, transformed overnight as if it were a different world altogether, a Paris for workers that smelled of blood all day?

The next morning, the execution of the two roses took place as scheduled.

The people gathered in the square were in a frenzy, screaming about revolution, about taking back power, shouting abuses at Antoine as he was transported in a crude, roofless wagon. Antoine, who had been so beautiful, was emaciated and transformed into a different person. Vivienne was

brought in next. Her hair had turned white, probably from exhaustion, and she was unsteady on her feet. Their eyes seemed to meet, but only for a moment. Urged to move, Antoine staggered to the block. The guillotine glinted in the morning sun as it fell towards the ground, severing Antoine's head from his body in a flash.

Next was Vivienne. She stumbled to the block. The guillotine fell once more, and the head of the beautiful lady was quickly separated from her body.

The crowd went wild as the executioner lifted the bloody head, clutching the white hair, once golden, in his rough hands.

Vivienne's eyes were closed. Though the tears clouded my vision, I could see her calm face even from a distance, which provided me some sort of solace. Silently I prayed for Vivienne and her uncle, that they would be together in heaven.

A fat, middle-aged woman started shouting curses and kicked Vivienne's thin body without mercy. She grabbed Vivienne's pale arms and dragged her to a corner of the square, laughing. I averted my gaze from the cruel sight. The tears, too, prevented me from seeing anything.

As noon approached, the people dispersed, leaving the grim guillotine and the bloodstained cobblestones behind. The square was quiet.

As I was about to leave, an old woman with gray hair came into the square, weaving against the crowd. Slowly. Wearing tattered clothes, she limped toward the guillotine. Her trembling hands were holding something. I looked closely.

It was a single white rose.

The old woman offered it before the guillotine, then limped away again. It was comforting knowing that there was someone who mourned for the once-beautiful roses. I wanted to chase after the old woman and ask her who she was, but before I knew it, she had already disappeared.

I still don't know who that old woman was. I haven't seen Roxy since then, too.

I am writing this memoir in the year 1811. About twenty years have passed since the French Revolution. A lot of things have happened in this country since then. A reign of terror began, and we lived in silence, careful not to say anything unnecessary. There is no need to talk about the long-

awaited arrival of Napoleon, the hero of the people, and the many tragic wars that followed.

I can't rid my mind of the image of the young lady who fell into her lover's arms, carrying a steel weight, on the night of the Revolution, or the gleaming guillotine that morning. The female fighter Roxy, and the ordinary old woman who left a white rose and walked away. Yes, this is the story of us ordinary women, one of history's mysteries that will forever remain unsolved.

I am old. I have been a spectator of history for a long time, and I would like to end this memoir here. I pray to God that one day there will be a new world without strife, that a true revolution will take place.

The gentle evening sun painted the candy house orange. At summer's end, the sun set a little earlier. The wind rustled the flowers in the flowerbeds, scattering their colorful petals, sending a few of them to Kazuya as he stood by the window.

It was the time of year when summer flowers fell and autumn flowers sprouted. Closing the book, Kazuya gave the little princess inside the room an inquiring look.

"Uh, what?"

Victorique was lying on the emerald, cabriole-legged couch with her eyes closed. Her rosy cheeks were swollen, and she was breathing softly through her tiny, pretty nose.

"Did she fall asleep?" Kazuya mumbled, disappointed.

"I'm awake."

"...Really?"

"Really," Victorique grunted irritably.

She slowly opened her eyes. Her long eyelashes fluttered. Deep green eyes regarded Kazuya.

"I was just thinking how the choices humans make are inefficient, illogical, and therefore, ludicrous," she said.

"You've lost me. That's what you were thinking while listening to the story? You're an odd one, all right."

"Hmm? Aren't you wondering how Roxy died?" Victorique said gloomily, then closed her eyes again.

Kazuya was lost in thought for a while.

The wind whistled, tossing red, white, and pink petals in the air.

Kazuya shrank a little. “Roxy? You mean the maid? Did she die? When? How do you know that?”

Keeping her eyes closed, Victorique said wearily, “She died in the morning.”

“Morning, I see. Which morning again?”

Victorique opened her eyes, her lips pursed in disbelief. “What do you mean which morning? The morning of the execution, of course. You were reading from the same memoir. How did you not realize that? Are you sure you’re not the one who fell asleep?”

“I was awake! How could I read if I was asleep? You were the one who looked asleep. I heard you breathing softly.”

“I fell asleep for only a second. I must say, that squishy pumpkin of a brain you have never ceases to amaze. How do you even stay unconscious with your eyes open? I’m surprised you made it all the way to Europe without dying at sea.”

Victorique rose from the couch, as though a switch had been flipped inside her, and started giving a lecture, berating Kazuya. She seemed a different person from the gloomy girl earlier. Her cheeks were puffed out, and she was shaking her tiny fists in the air, looking delighted.

Kazuya just gaped at her for a while, then chuckled.

Offended, Victorique closed her mouth. “What are you laughing at, pumpkin head?”

“It’s nothing.”

“How rude.”

Kazuya poked her cheek. Victorique slapped his finger away.

“Ouch!”

“Hmph!”

“Anyway, back to the topic at hand. When and how did Roxy die? I couldn’t tell at all from reading the memoir. The author said she hadn’t seen her since the night before the execution, when she was wandering around Paris, searching for the desk. How did she die after that?”

“She was executed,” Victorique said in a deep voice. She appeared a little melancholic.

“Executed? She was a revolutionary, no? When?”

“Roxy died as Vivienne de Jaricot,” she replied, fiddling with the white roses that Kazuya had given her.

“What do you mean?”

“The white-haired woman who was executed after Antoine that morning was not Vivienne. It was Roxy. She was running around Paris the night before, looking for the desk, but she couldn’t find it. The steel key was nowhere to be found, and Vivienne could not free herself from the weight. We don’t know what conversation took place between Roxy and Vivienne when the former visited the women’s prison again in the middle of the night. As the nanny who wrote the memoir said, ‘this is the story of us ordinary women, one of history’s mysteries that will forever remain unsolved’. However, Roxy and Vivienne actually switched places. Vivienne de Jaricot’s lovely blonde hair had turned white from distress. Roxy may have dyed her hair to match, or perhaps her dark hair had also lost its color overnight due to panic and grief. Roxy let Vivienne go and pretended to be Vivienne herself. Morning came, and she was dragged out with Antoine and executed as Vivienne de Jaricot.”

“I can’t believe it...”

“Of course, Antoine would have known that it wasn’t his niece, but the maid. That she switched places with her and resolved to die with him. If the revolutionary government knew that Vivienne escaped, they would have sent men after her. A woman carrying a heavy piece of steel couldn’t have gotten very far. But if the impostor was executed, no one would know she escaped, and no one would come after her. What did Antoine feel in his last moments? Relief? Sadness? The woman he loved managed to escape, while the one who loved him chose to die with him.”

Victorique paused. She inclined her head slightly, and played with the rose in her hand with the innocence of a child.

“Recall the author’s account. The woman’s eyes were closed when she was executed. She might have been afraid of the color of her eyes revealing her true identity. A change in her appearance could be ascribed to her life in prison, but the color of her eyes was one thing she couldn’t fake. Vivienne’s eyes were black, while Roxy’s were blue. That’s why Roxy closed her eyes tightly in her final moments. To protect Vivienne.”

“I see.”

“You read that a middle-aged woman dragged the decapitated body to a corner of the square. How could one woman drag Vivienne by herself with the belt weighing her down? Because it was Roxy. The female

revolutionary died not for change, but for love. Hence why I was thinking about the strange choices humans make. There were other ways to live.”

“Then who was the old woman that left the white flower?”

“It was Vivienne,” Victorique said indifferently. “The author of the memoir did not see the woman’s face. She assumed she was old because of her white hair and the way she limped. Her hair changed to white from her time in prison. And her limp was because of the steel chastity belt that still bound her after she escaped from prison.”

Kazuya gasped. “So the woman with the white hair was Vivienne? That she was hiding young, beautiful features?”

“I believe so. And there’s a secret to the white rose she left behind. I think it was a message from Vivienne to Antoine. That she would always be his. After all, she would be living her life with the weight still on her.”

Victorique’s sounded neither childish nor mature. Her face was bereft of emotion.

“White roses signify purity,” she added.

The wind blew again, strewing petals from the flowerbeds. The sun was setting, and rosy twilight blanketed the candy house. It was a little chilly. Leaning against the window sill, Kazuya watched his little friend, who had solved the mystery in no time at all.

“That’s it for the memoir, Kujou. But what do you think happened to Vivienne after that? The former daughter of a Count who disappeared into the streets of Paris, dragging her heavy body along. Where did she go? How did she live her life? A white rose who became an ordinary woman and faded away to obscurity. Humans are strange creatures, don’t you think?”

“Yeah...” Kazuya was staring at his friend’s head.

Memories from a year ago flashed in his mind. He had decided to study in a faraway foreign country, and had taken the long journey on a ship to the Kingdom of Sauville, the little giant of Western Europe. His choice surprised everyone in his family. And then he met a mysterious golden girl, Victorique, a little giant herself, in a way. For some reason, she remained friends with Kazuya, waiting for him to visit her. Perhaps this, too, was a strange choice she had made.

The ordinary people that Kazuya knew all had mysterious sides to them. His sister’s thickheaded and rebellious attitude. His second brother’s love

for invention, and his secret lover. The cheerful Avril's penchant for ghost stories.

Perhaps their individual mysteries would harmonize and eventually create a great wave that would move history, Kazuya thought, standing upright with a serious face.

The lovely roses, despite the absence of wind, swayed softly in Victorique's hand.

Kazuya poked Victorique's tiny hair whorl.

"Can you not touch me so casually?" Victorique growled. "You've been getting too familiar lately. Now sing and dance while you reflect on what you've done."

"No way. I don't want to dance. Besides, a little poking should be all right."

Victorique exhaled sharply. "Pumpkin-headed stripling." She turned her head away.

Then she slowly got off the couch and walked out of the room, dragging her golden hair behind. Kazuya felt a little sad. He wondered where she had gone, when she came back, her ruffled nightgown swaying. Her face remained impassive.

"What's up?" Kazuya asked.

"Hmph."

"At least say someth—" Kazuya shut his mouth.

Victorique poured half a glass of water into a delicate glass, held it with both hands, and walked slowly so as not to spill it. She placed it gently on the mini-table filled with books next to the couch.





She then put the rose that Kazuya brought into the glass. She stared at the flowers and the glass anxiously for a while, wondering if what she did was enough. The way she was looking at them made Kazuya laugh. He patted her golden head.

“Gah! Hands off!” Victorique snarled.

“Haha. She’s mad. Ouch!”

Victorique’s growl, a dull thud, and Kazuya’s yelp drifted from the candy house and into the dusky, late-summer sky.

The rosy twilight shimmered, gently enveloping the colorful flowerbed maze.

Chapter 2 [Eternity]: A Tale of Purple Tulips —The Netherlands, 1635—

One sunny morning in late summer, St. Marguerite Academy.

The garden sprawled across the vast campus was slowly losing its vibrant colors. The fading foliage and the flowers in their beds swayed in the cool breeze.

Cold water trickled down from the white fountains. Petals drifted on the surface of the water like tiny boats. It was still early in the morning, so none of the usually noisy, uniformed children of the nobility were to be seen. The garden looked like an isolated paradise.

“Hngh. Got it.”

A boy’s bright voice came from a lush tree standing in the empty, marvelous garden, near the gravel path. There was a rustling sound, and an oriental boy appeared from between the leaves. He was wearing a serious look, his jet-black eyes a little misty. Balancing himself on a thick branch, he looked down below.

“This soft and purple ribbon, right? Victorique? Hello?”

The boy—Kazuya Kujou—smiled. He was holding a dark purple cotton ribbon. The wind blew, and the vibrant ribbon fluttered up, momentarily blocking his vision.

“You can stop crying now. Here. Hmm?”

The golden-haired girl—Victorique—who had been standing on the grass some distance away, looking up at the tree tops a moment ago, started walking. Standing about 140 centimeters tall, with a petite and slim figure, she was wearing a refreshing, cotton dress, in gradated shades of pink and purple. Her skirt, which billowed out at the hips and reached her ankles, had five layers of ruffles and adorned with shiny pink pearls.

A three-strand necklace with the same pink pearls was wrapped around her slender neck. On her head was a tiny straw hat that looked like a toy, with lots of small ribbons, swinging from side to side with her every step.

“Where are you going, Victorique? Oh, you’re coming here.”

Victorique approached the tree. Silently she gripped the ladder that Kazuya had propped up against the trunk with both hands.

“Wh-What are you doing?” Kazuya asked. “Do you want to climb up too? It’s dangerous. You’re tiny and not very coordinated. You trip over your own feet a lot. Just wait down there.”

There was a faint, audible snort. Then, Victorique tried to lift the ladder, but her meager strength could not move it. She went about it for a while, her face turning red. Her tiny hat quivered.

“Wh-What are you doing?”

“Hngh... I thought...” A deep, husky voice came from below. “I thought it would be hilarious to see you flustered.”

The ladder rose for a moment, but Victorique couldn’t handle its weight. She let out an adorable, uncharacteristic yelp as she toppled to the grass with the ladder.

Victorique rolled over on her stomach. Her ruffled skirt was upturned, and the floral embroidery on her soft bloomers stirred in the wind.

“Are you okay?” Kazuya asked gingerly from atop the tree.

“...”

There was no reply. Kazuya waited for a while.

“Hello?” he called again.

A bundle of pink and purple ruffles slowly rose.

Victorique was holding her face with her small, chubby hands. Her shoulders were quivering.

Kazuya studied her with concern. A moment later, he smiled.

“I get it,” he said. “You’re embarrassed, aren’t you? You’re too proud, I guess. Imagine falling victim to your own mischief.” He chuckled. “You get embarrassed so easily. Can you put that ladder back up? I kinda need it.”

Victorique slowly turned. “Even if I could, I wouldn’t do it.”

She seemed to have hit her pretty little nose hard on the ladder, as the tip was a little red. Tears welled up in her deep green, jewel-like eyes.

“Even if my pride was on the line,” she added.

“You don’t have to bring your pride into it. Your pride meant nothing the moment you fell. Look, if you can’t do it, go call Ms. Cecile. I have to get down, or I’ll miss morning classes. I’m proud of having the best grades in class and never skipping lessons.”

“What worthless pride.”

“And yours is supposed to be worth something? Wait, where are you going? You’re the one who called me so early for your ribbon. What’s with your attitude? I didn’t even finish my breakfast! You should learn proper manners. Hey, are you listening?”

Victorique ignored him and walked away. Her pink and glassy, high-heeled shoes receded into the distance.

“Get back here, you meanie!” Kazuya bellowed.

Come on, you can do it, Kazuya told himself. You’re the third son of an imperial soldier.

He jumped down. His jet-black hair floated in the wind, and the bottom of his school jacket billowed.

Kazuya nimbly landed on the grass, then rose to his feet. Victorique’s green eyes widened in surprise.

Smiling smugly, he broke into a run. Victorique quickened her pace. Like a black Doberman chasing a little pink rabbit, Kazuya immediately caught up with Victorique. She crouched down and curled up.

“Now say you’re sorry,” Kazuya demanded.

Victorique exhaled sharply.

“Don’t give me that.” Kazuya knelt on the grass and wrapped the soft ribbon around Victorique’s hat. “Man, you’re such a handful. Hmm?”

Victorique’s long and magnificent golden hair flowed down to the grass like a small, golden river. Her nape was a little hotter than usual.

Victorique and Kazuya had just returned to the academy a few days ago after solving a case that occurred on the Old Masquerade, a transcontinental train. Victorique developed a fever from the fatigue, so she spent the whole day yesterday resting on the couch in her room. He thought she was feeling better since she went out for a walk in the garden.

“I’m not mad,” Kazuya said. “So raise your head.”

With a grunt, Victorique slowly lifted her head. Kazuya studied her face, and Victorique held his gaze with vacant, green eyes. Her delicate features made him want to stare at her face forever, searching for the slightest change in her expression.

It felt like she still had a fever.

Kazuya placed a hand on her forehead, and she hunched her shoulders. Kazuya placed his other hand on his own forehead.

“Yup, you still have a fever,” Kazuya said. “You’re burning.”

“Indeed. I feel a little sluggish.”

“Then why are you out walking and causing mischief? You don’t have to go out of your way just so you could bully me, you know. You should lie down until evening. Understood?”

“You’re not the boss of me, pumpkin-head.”

“I’m just worried about you. Now go back to your place and rest, okay?”

Kazuya pulled Victorique’s hand and started walking toward the marvelous maze of colorful flowerbeds. They turned left and then right at the corner of the green labyrinth.

Kazuya noticed Victorique’s low spirits. “You can go back to the library once your fever goes down, yeah?”

Victorique tucked her pale chin a bit. Whether it was a nod, Kazuya wasn’t sure. Her expression remained unchanged.

“I’ll find more stories that involve flowers,” Kazuya said. “So you don’t get bored.”

“I want purple flowers, then.”

“Purple? Okay, you got it.” Kazuya smiled. “The same color as your dress today, I suppose.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll see you in the evening, then.”

“You are such a nag!”

Kazuya flared, and Victorique quickly bolted away.

“Wait, Victorique!”

Like a rabbit escaping into its burrow, she burst through the front door of the small, candy house.

Later that evening.

The sun was setting, and the vast garden of St. Marguerite Academy was bathed in rosy dusk. The lawn, iron benches, and cozy gazebos were filled with students, spending their after-school hours however they wanted.

A boy wearing a serious look was walking briskly along the white gravel path from the direction of St. Marguerite’s Grand Library. It was Kazuya. He was carrying a thick book under his arm and holding a bunch of purple flowers in his other hand. He weaved through the chattering students until he finally arrived at the flowerbed maze.

Among the students, a carefree, blooming girl with short blonde hair and blue eyes stretched herself when she noticed Kazuya. It was Avril Bradley. A friend called out to her, and she turned her head to respond, then as if pulled by an invisible thread, she looked again toward Kazuya's direction. But he had already been sucked into the maze.





Avril's sky-blue eyes flickered. "He's gone!"

"Hmm? What's wrong?" her friend asked.

Avril shook her head several times. Frowning, she flapped her arms around.

"He was holding flowers," she mumbled.

The wind blew, rustling the leaves on the trees.

Avril pondered for a while, curiously watching the direction in which Kazuya had disappeared to.

"Victorique, are you there?"

There was a grunt, and the window of the candy house opened soundlessly.

Victorique was sitting on an emerald-green, cabriole-legged couch by the window, still and quiet as a caged rabbit. On the couch was the petite Victorique, a ruffled dress, and a few confectioneries, including macarons, chocolates, and pure-white meringues.

She rested her pale little chin on the window sill and looked at Kazuya crossly.

"Wh-What is it?" Kazuya asked.

"I'm bored. I'm dying. I might perish in five seconds."

"Boredom doesn't kill. Anyway, here you go." Wearing an earnest look, he presented the bouquet of purple flowers. "F-Flowers."

Victorique nodded. "Indeed, they are flowers."

"Yeah..."

It was a bunch of purplish tulips that bloomed in the conservatory. The flowers brought a burst of color to Victorique's house, which was furnished with small cabriole-legged table and chairs, a chest, and a lovely carpet. The floor was filled with piles of books. Victorique took the bouquet indifferently and held it silently before her chest.

"What is this?" She sniffed the flowers. "Hmm!"

Holding the flowers tight, she turned her back. Gravely, Kazuya opened the book he was holding under his arm.

He stammered as he began reading. "Uh, apparently purple tulips are, uh... the king of tulips, and they're called Viceroy tulips."

"Uh huh."

Relieved to hear a response, Kazuya continued.

“Viceroys were sold for high prices during the tulip mania in the Netherlands a long time ago. But nowadays there are a lot of them in the library’s conservatory.”

“Uh huh.”

“The Dutch went crazy for this pretty purple flower in the 17th century, about three hundred years ago.”

“Uh huh.”

Kazuya glanced at Victorique. She was still sniffing the flowers delightfully.

“Most of the deals involving the flower were done at taverns over a drink,” he went on. “The owner of one of those taverns, the Golden Grape, left a diary that was turned into a book. I’m going to read it. There’s a story about a couple of mysterious lovers.”

“Uh huh.”

Kazuya looked at Victorique. Her small ears twitched. *She’s listening*, he thought.

“All right. Here I go.” Straightening his back, Kazuya resumed. “The Golden Grape was a bar established by my father’s father, who is now resting in a cemetery in the suburbs of Amsterdam, around fifty years ago, in 1590.”

The wind blew, stirring the purple petals in Victorique’s hands.

The Golden Grape was a bar established by my father’s father, who is now resting in a cemetery in the suburbs of Amsterdam, around fifty years ago, in 1590. I don’t really know much about what happened back then, but it is no doubt an old establishment that had witnessed a part of the history of Amsterdam, a port city in the Netherlands.

I know nothing about the past, but I’ve seen and heard about a lot of interesting incidents over the past ten years or so since I became the proprietor. I’m thinking of writing them down after business hours, when the noisy, drunken customers have staggered home, and I’m all alone at the Golden Grape after cleaning up. I’m an educated man for a tavern owner. I can read and write. As to what I’m going to do after I’m done writing everything down, I’ll probably hand the place over to my son. He’s just a little snot-nosed kid right now, but when he grows up, he’ll take over this tavern. And just like his father, his grandfather, and his grandfather’s father,

he'll be a witness to the joys and sorrows of the people of this city. I'm sure of it. I wanted to know about my own father's and my grandfather's experiences too, so I'm going to record what I had witnessed for my son.

The most interesting event of the last ten years in the Netherlands was, without doubt, the tulip trade. What I'm about to share is the story of a pair of lovers who danced in the shadows of the tulip mania.

To this day, I still don't know exactly what it was about. We townspeople don't really understand it, but one of our regular customers, a scholar, told me about it when he was a little drunk. It started with the Dutch Revolt, which began about 70 years ago. In the aftermath of the war, Amsterdam, once a rural fisherman's town, suddenly became a bustling port city that conducted trade with various countries. The Netherlands itself began profiting off the trade with the East, which had been monopolized by Spain. In the next seventy years, the people's lifestyle gradually went from modest to luxurious.

The Netherlands entered its golden age by bringing spices and sugar from its colonies in the east and selling them in Europe. The economic boom continued, with clothing and food becoming more and more extravagant. And then what was next? Housing. Building luxurious houses with fine architecture became prevalent. People were thrilled, building houses like it was a competition and then bragging about it. With houses done, what came next?

Gardens. People were ecstatic about creating gardens. They competed with each other to create gardens so beautiful that their houses didn't look like they belonged to laymen.

And then what came next?

Flowers. Have you figured it out yet? We Dutch people wanted a rare and beautiful flower to plant in our garden and brag about.

And one rare flower was the tulip.

A fantastical flower with a never-before-seen shape that bloomed in the gardens of a rear palace in a foreign land in the East. First it attracted the rich people who were enthusiastic about building mansions and gardens, and then the craze spread to us, the common people who couldn't even afford to buy such things. It only lasted about ten years, from the 1620s to the 1630s. It might sound like the craze didn't last long, but that's just how

it is with crazes. Anyway, the tulip bulb, the mysterious flower of the East, became an impossible dream for us Dutch during those ten years.

This craze gradually spread from the luxurious trading venues that the rich frequented to the places where ordinary people spent their days, and finally to the Golden Grape, where I manage. It was the year 1635, just before the tulip bubble burst.

A beautiful lady appeared.

Her name was Bluett Marsh, the most beautiful woman in Amsterdam, who got in trouble because of tulips.

Are you familiar with the term *windhandel*?

It's what the sailors that frequent this port city call the challenge of steering a ship headwind. In the Netherlands, they used the same term to refer to the tulip trade. A fitting term, to be sure, as it was like making an agreement with the wind.

At first, people were buying and selling actual bulbs for an agreed price, but the bubble expanded rapidly for anyone to keep up. Besides, for those who just wanted to make money, the flowers themselves didn't really matter. So they started trading bulbs that they had yet to obtain. As they resold contracts to others at higher prices, the price rapidly rose. People started borrowing money from the bank using these imaginary bulbs as collateral, saying, 'When the bulbs arrive, I'll be rich, then I can pay the money back.' And the common people, dreaming of striking it rich, chose the neighborhood taverns as places to do business, where they could transact with anyone.

The Golden Grape was one of them. Every night, it was crowded with people trading tulips. There was a popular method of selling called *in het ootje*, in which you wrote the price you wanted to sell tulips for on the letter O drawn on a slate and went around showing it. Men, with small slates in their hands, would get into a frenzy every night.

Around that time, a father and daughter moved to Amsterdam. Mr. Marsh and his daughter apparently made huge profits from trade with the East, which was not so uncommon in the Netherlands at that time. The reason why they became famous was because the daughter, an eighteen-year-old girl named Bluett, had beautiful features that none had ever seen before.

I'd never heard about her mother, so I'm guessing she had the blood of an Eastern woman in her. Glossy dark skin, black eyes, and dark-gold hair. She had a chiseled, exotic face. I remember when men all over Amsterdam used to hang around Mr. Marsh's house, chasing after Bluett. It was a kind of frenzy, in a way.

One of them was a young, penniless orphan named Harry Harris. He was around sixteen or seventeen years old, and had been working here at the Golden Grape for about six months. I don't know what he did before that. He looked a bit like Bluett. Not that he was beautiful, but he had dark skin, and had the same look in his eyes. He might have had the same Eastern blood in him and was hiding it. I never asked him, though.

Harry was completely into Bluett. He wasn't exactly a hard worker, so I always yelled at him, but he had become more and more useless. Apparently, he was walking in the park when it started to rain and he let Bluett under his umbrella. On the way to Mr. Marsh's house, they talked for a while, and he took a liking to her. Bluett was on his mind all day and all night. But he had no chance with her. As to why...





A cool, evening breeze blew, rustling the flowers in the beds.

Kazuya's jet-black hair stirred in the wind as he stood by the window reading the book.

Inside the candy house, Victorique lay on an emerald-colored couch. Her eyes were closed, her magnificent hair flowing like a river of gold to the floor.

Kazuya paused. He looked at her and listened closely.

He could hear soft breathing.

"She's asleep," Kazuya breathed, disappointed.

"I'm awake," groaned a deep, husky voice.

Victorique's long eyelashes moved as she slowly opened her eyes. Deep green orbs gazed at Kazuya.

"Why doesn't Harry have any chance with her?" she asked.

"Oh, so you were listening." Ecstatic, Kazuya cleared his throat and turned his gaze back to the book. "As to why, uhm... Ah, right. He's penniless."

"Sounds like a loser."

"You don't have any money either."

"Indeed, I do not." Victorique nodded, her face emotionless.

Then she closed her eyes again. She raised a hand and waved it, urging him to continue.

Kazuya stood straight. "But he had no chance with her. As to why..."

Far above, a rosy dusk slowly enveloped the surroundings, softly illuminating the candy house, the flowerbed maze, and the two.

As to why, Harry was penniless, while Mr. Marsh was rich. He had a fine house and garden, though rented, and he had declared that he would only give his daughter to a man richer than him. He thought that if his daughter, who was used to a life of luxury, fell in love with a poor man, she would never be happy.

Every day, Harry looked up at Mr. Marsh's manor and sighed. He didn't even do any work. I thought he had little hope, too, until one day. Harry got to know Bluett better. This time, Harry was in trouble, and it was she who helped him. His shoe got stuck in a drainage cover. He was having trouble pulling his foot out, when Bluett came by.

“Why don’t you take off your shoe?” she had said. “I’ll pull it out for you.”

Harry took off his shoe and waited, standing on one leg, while Bluett pulled out his shoe and handed it to him. After that, Bluett started to come to the Golden Grape to see Harry. They got along well, they had similar features, and they had fun talking to each other. But the problem was Mr. Marsh. One day, when Harry visited Mr. Marsh’s home, he was literally thrown out by the man himself. The father’s roar was heard all throughout Amsterdam.

“You maggot! Come near my daughter again, and I’ll have you loaded on a cargo ship and sent to the East!”

I heard him all the way here in my tavern. The whole city knew about it. I’d like to say that I felt most sorry for Bluett, but she was surprisingly unaffected.

“I can’t marry you if my dad’s mad at me,” she said. Harry was sobbing. “He raised me on his own, you know. We only have each other.”

“Maggot was too far.”

Bluett chuckled. “It was. But to my father, a poor man is a maggot. I doubt anything can change his mind.”

“What about you? Which one do you value? Money, or love?”

“Both.” She giggled.

Bluett was a couple of years older than Harry. Her straightforward answer left him dejected. They were having such a loud conversation at the tavern’s counter that even the people busy doing their tulip business couldn’t help but hear them.

One day, Harry overheard a group of people trading in imaginary tulip bulbs. Yes, he heard about Viceroy, the purple, mythical king of tulips that almost no one had ever seen.

It is said that the big flower with beautiful purple petals only grows in a small garden in the rear palace of a small country in the East. No one had ever brought one back to Europe, so a single flower would fetch a price high enough to keep you fed for ten years. Even the people didn’t dare to make transactions for a bulb they couldn’t obtain. They only talked about it in fearful whispers. Only Harry, the absolute idiot, thought about getting his hands on the purple flower for the beautiful Bluett.

I remember the night before Harry disappeared very well.

He and Bluett were having their usual quarrel at the tavern's counter. Bluett's voice was so loud that it seemed to echo throughout the whole city. Customers and servers alike stopped whatever they were doing.

"You're the biggest idiot in all of the Netherlands!"

"Don't get too cocky now just 'cause you're a little pretty, dark-skinned brat."

"Look who's talking!"

For a while, I had no idea what they were arguing about, but according to the people present, Harry said he was going to travel east to become a rich man and marry Bluett.

"I'll come back rich, I swear. And then we can be together forever."

"That's impossible. You're too stupid," Bluett replied.

But we knew how she felt. To put it simply, she didn't want him to go somewhere far and risk his safety. She was worried about her lover, but she couldn't communicate it well enough. If only she'd been upfront about her feelings. They had a terrible falling out, and the next morning, Harry snuck onto Mr. Marsh's trading ship and headed to the East for real.

We were in disbelief. Harry wasn't exactly smart. Forget getting rich, we doubted that he would even make it back to Europe in one piece. We all forgot about Harry and returned to our frenzied business transactions.

Six months later, a shocking news arrived.

Mr. Marsh and some Dutch merchants were in the East to buy spices, when they bumped into Harry at the market. Gone was the bright and carefree Harry Harris; he was pale and haggard, and he was constantly trembling. It was like he was a different person altogether. Mr. Marsh and the others were concerned, but Harry never told them what had happened to him. In exchange for his changed appearance, however, Harry had acquired an extraordinary trump card.

Viceroy. The purple tulips.

When Harry told them that he had obtained numerous bulbs, Mr. Marsh and the Dutch merchants looked puzzled at first. Harry told them that he was about to set sail for the Netherlands, and he offered to show them to his crude ship. Though a little creeped out, they reluctantly followed. It was a small ship, pitch-black and ominous as darkness itself. Harry led Mr. Marsh to a dim cabin, in which the man fearfully entered. It was dirty, dusty, and

cramped inside. Mr. Marsh gasped. The other merchants, too, peered into the cabin.

Eerie purple tulips were blooming all over the shadowy room of the crude ship. Light was streaming in through the door, and even the air seemed to be tinted a deep purple. The flowers, shaped like a bunch of swords, cast shadows to the left and right of the floor.

After a moment of astonishment, Mr. Marsh stumbled out of the cabin.

“I’ll buy the purple flowers, Harry,” the man said.

“What about your daughter?”

“You can have her hand when you return to the Netherlands. You will be a lot richer than I am with this much Viceroy.”

The merchants were eager to buy the bulbs, too. Word spread quickly throughout Europe, and *windhandel* transactions began all throughout this city. Everyone bought and sold the purple flower bulbs, causing the price to rise to unprecedented levels.

The crude ship carrying Harry and the Viceroys left the harbor.

We waited for Harry’s return. A month passed, then two. Harry never made it to Amsterdam. There was a huge storm. The ship that returned was not Harry’s, but a luxurious ship carrying Mr. Marsh and his merchant friends. It had arrived first despite leaving after Harry. Mr. Marsh and the merchants grew restless as they waited for the now-rich young man. What happened to the purple flowers that they paid a huge sum for?

Ten more days passed.

A wooden plank washed ashore. It bore the name of Harry’s crude ship.

The good-natured Harry somehow got very lucky in the East, but in the end a storm sank his ship. Harry died, the purple flowers going down with him, but everyone too suffered huge losses, including Mr. Marsh. Word on the street was that Bluett was so shocked that she became ill and bedridden. Mr. Marsh took a train to Switzerland so his daughter could recuperate. He said he would take her to the mountains, where the air was clean.

Around that time, the tulip mania began to die down. People were manipulated by something that did not exist. Prices soared, while the bulbs arrived later. It was only a matter of time before the bubble burst. At the end of 1636, that time had finally come. All the promissory notes popped, and it was over. Nobody talks about tulips anymore. A shame, too. They were lovely flowers.

Tonight at the Golden Grape, customers talked about all sorts of things, but none remembered the story of poor Harry Harris and the exotic beauty Bluett anymore. Instead they talked about a new spice from the East, nutmeg. It has a very nice aroma. It's good with meat, so housewives want it, but it's expensive.

No one talks about the lovely purple Viceroy anymore. So I thought I'd just leave you with the story of the flower and the odd, tragic lovers.

Oops. It's almost dawn. I'd better go home, have a midnight snack, and go to bed. I'll make sure to write down any other interesting events. Amsterdam is a strange city, after all.

Oh yeah, one more thing. I still don't know why, but Mr. Marsh and his daughter...

The vast campus of St. Marguerite Academy had gone completely dark, and the bright, pale moonlight began to shine on the roof of the candy house.

Lying on the emerald-colored couch, Victorique slowly rose and let out a small yawn. Her glossy cherry lips parted a little.

"Mr. Marsh and his daughter never made it to Switzerland. Am I right?" she said wearily.

"Y-Yeah." Kazuya nodded. He closed the book and rested his elbow on the window sill. "How did you know? Have you read this book?" he asked, poking Victorique's cheek.

"No." Victorique turned her head away grumpily. Her golden hair stirred. "Don't touch me," she grumbled softly.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry. I couldn't help myself. Your cheek's so chubby."

Victorique turned her gaze back to Kazuya, bothered by his remark. Her eyes were wide open.

"The father and daughter probably alighted on the way to Switzerland and met up with Harry Harris," she said in a low voice.

"Harry?" Kazuya muttered. "Wasn't he dead? His ship got caught in a storm on his way back from the East."

"He never set sail." Her voice was husky. "He only pretended to set sail and returned under the cover of night. Then he escaped. The rest was up to Mr. Marsh and his daughter."

"What do you mean?"

“What, you didn’t realize it? Argh, fine. I’ll explain it to you from the beginning. Now stand there and apologize.”

“I’m sorry... Wait, your threatening aura actually made me apologize for no reason. Anyway, I thought Harry and the Marsh father-and-daughter were strangers.”

“They were a trio of swindlers, and they were in cahoots all along. The people of the city should have known.”

Victorique inclined her head quizzically and shook it. Her golden hair cascaded to the floor with a pleasant whisper.

The pale moonlight grew brighter. Victorique’s lips parted.

“The father and daughter—no, the family...”

“Family?”

“Mr. Marsh, the older sister Bluett, and the younger brother Harry. They were probably using aliases anyway. We’ll just have to use the same names for convenience.”

“Mr. Marsh and Harry are father and son? Really? So Bluett and Harry were related? I thought they were lovers.”

“Of course not. Recall the journal of the owner of the Golden Grape. He mentioned that both had similar, exotic features. They were simply brother and sister. The author also said that they had fun talking to each other, but it wasn’t exactly sweet banter, was it? It was just siblings’ quarrel. While everything was just an act to attract the attention of simpletons, their real feelings probably surfaced from time to time.”

“But why?”

“It was a scam that took advantage of the tulip mania. Listen closely. The Marsh family first garnered fame in Amsterdam using the sister, a beautiful woman. She pretended to be in love with her brother, who came to the city at the same time and started working, creating an uproar. When their father declared that he would not give his daughter to a penniless man, he made sure the whole city could hear it. The brother left for the East, and six months later, Mr. Marsh saw that Harry had found the mythical tulip.”

Kazuya gasped. Victorique’s golden hair shook. She was laughing.

“The East is huge. The chances of Mr. Marsh’s party and Harry bumping into each other were slim. They probably arranged their meeting beforehand. Harry led them to the crude ship, and only Mr. Marsh entered

the cabin. Mr. Marsh, the man who hated Harry the most, shouted, ‘It’s Viceroy tulips!’”

“Yeah...”

“The merchants believed him. They fought with Mr. Marsh to buy the fabled, purple tulips.”

“But the journal said that the merchants saw Mr. Marsh standing among the purple tulips.”

“A simple trick,” Victorique snorted. “Harry probably bought just a few tulips. To make it look like there were a lot of them, he brought a bunch of mirrors into the cabin where he put the flowers. The tulips reflected on one mirror were reflected on another mirror, and so on, until what few flowers filled the whole cabin. The journal said that the tulips cast shadows from left to right. The light coming in from the door should have cast shadows in one direction only. The reason it looked like they were cast everywhere was because the shadows too were reflected by the mirrors. The tulips themselves were probably just white flowers reflected on mirrors that were painted purple. That’s why the air itself seemed purple. But...”

“Yeah?”

“While the merchants peering inside the cabin were deceived, Mr. Marsh would have realized the truth. Therefore, we can conclude that he was in league with Harry. Do you understand?”

Kazuya nodded. “So you’re saying that Harry and his family got the merchants to buy non-existent purple tulips, haggled over the price, and then the three of them ran off with the money?”

“Yes.” Victorique nodded languidly. “The tulip mania in Europe revolving around a flower from the East was very short-lived. Mr. Marsh, a man familiar with the East, was well aware of this, and so were Harry and Bluett, themselves like exotic flowers. They sold illusions just before the ball burst, made a huge profit, and fled.”

“I see...”

“*In het ootje*, the Dutch term used by the common folk to refer to trading using slates, actually has another meaning—‘to deceive’. Ah, the irony.”

Kazuya stared at the book, wearing a perplexed expression. He was thinking.

“If Harry didn’t drown at sea, and if Mr. Marsh and his daughter didn’t go to Switzerland to recuperate, where did they go after obtaining so much

money, then? How did they spend their lives?”

“Who knows? I doubt they ever appeared on the center stage of history again. The common folk appear momentarily, and then disappear back into the shadows of history.”

Victorique leaned forward and rested her tiny pale chin on the window sill. They were staring at each other up close. Her face was as impassive as ever, yet somewhat melancholic. Kazuya’s gaze was fixed on his mysterious friend’s cool, doll-like features. He wanted to catch even the slightest change of expression on the face of the enigmatic girl.

“After acquiring enormous wealth, they either went west or east. Maybe the money made them happy. Maybe it didn’t change anything. Maybe it even made them unhappy. Either way, people have always sought wealth. Like the beautiful lady Bluett, who, when asked whether she wanted love or money, laughed and said both. As a matter of fact, purple tulips signify royalty, in other words, wealth.”

Kazuya thought Victorique’s face brightened a little. Perhaps he just imagined it.

“A madness fit to go on for eternity,” she continued. “The dreams of those who seek riches are boundless. And it will repeat itself as long as mankind exists.”

“Yeah...” Kazuya closed his eyes.

The pale moonlight disappeared from view.

Suddenly, Kazuya’s mind was filled with images of a young man and woman with exotic features, holding hands and laughing as they ran off. A close sister and brother with dark skin, black eyes, and golden hair. An older man who looked like their father was with them.

“We did well, didn’t we?”

“Yeah!”

“Ah, the look on their faces when they lost all their money.”

“What are we gonna do next, sis?”

“There’s a lot of things I want to buy.”

“Me too.”

“What about you, dad?”

“Me? Well.”

Well?

What was it?

No.

It was all an illusion.

Kazuya slowly opened his eyes.

Victorique was watching him curiously. Her face was so close that his breath seized in his throat. He then smiled at his beautiful little friend.

Victorique's cheeks lifted slightly... a smile, most likely. Or perhaps it was just his imagination.

Pale, glistening moonlight fell on the flowerbeds, shining on the colorful petals.





Chapter 3 [Fascination]: A Tale of Black Mandrakes —China, 23 A.D.—

A gentle and sunny afternoon.

St. Marguerite Academy.

Small white flowers blooming on the trimmed lawn swayed in the occasional breeze. A bell rang in the distance, signaling the end of classes. Children of nobility streamed out of the huge U-shaped school building and headed toward the dormitories, careful not to step on the flowers on the grass.

Murmurs, footsteps. These sounds gradually faded until the garden was once again enveloped in silence.

One sleepy, sunny afternoon.

“It’s a curse!”

At the far end of the lawn, near the tall hedges trimmed into the shapes of various animals that separated the school from the outside world, came a girl’s sweet voice. Her French had a hint of a British accent, and sounded like the chirping of a little bird.

But the lovely voice was at odds with the hair-raising topic at hand.

“Mandrakes are cursed root vegetables. It’s used in dark rituals, and looking at it will get you cursed. It’s a staple of ghost stories.”

“Cursed?!” yelped a woman in response. Her French, gentle and soft, had no accent.

“That’s right!”

“Really?”

“Get away from the mandrake!”

“Kyah!”

A girl in school uniform and a woman in a white blouse and a long, white-gray skirt rolled out of the shadows of the lawn, hugging each other. The girl had short blonde hair and big eyes as clear as the blue sky. Her long, graceful arms and legs offered her a blooming appearance. The

woman, on the other hand, had shoulder-length, fluffy brown hair and wore large round glasses. Her round, puppy-dog eyes and adorable aura made her seem younger than her actual age.

The girl—Avril Bradley, granddaughter of Sir Bradley the adventurer, and a student from England—bolted to her feet and stared into the bushes. A second later, the woman—Cecile Lafitte, a teacher—rose unsteadily and hid behind Avril.

“I don’t like scary stuff,” the teacher said.

“What are you scared about?” a boy’s calm voice came from behind them.

Avril and Ms. Cecile turned around, holding each other’s hands tight.

The boy, an oriental with jet-black hair and eyes, was standing stiffly upright, watching them suspiciously. As Kazuya Kujou approached them cautiously, Avril and Cecile scurried toward him.

“Kujou, do you know what a mandrake is?” Avril said. “It’s a cursed plant, often mentioned in old tales!”

“I’m scared,” Ms. Cecile added. “Avril said that’s what that weird thing growing there is!”

“It’s a curse. It has to be!”

“Right next to my violets! Nooo!”

They dragged Kazuya into the bushes.

“Uh, I have some business to attend to,” Kazuya mumbled, ready to flee. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

The ladies pushed him deeper into the bush.

“Oh, there’s something here,” Kazuya said.

“That’s it!” Avril exclaimed.

“It’s a weird plant,” Ms. Cecile explained. “It wasn’t there before!”

“Weird?” Kazuya crouched down and stared at the plant growing out of the ground. “It looks like a *daikon*.”

Its long, thin roots were peeking out of the soil, and it had thick, green leaves. It looked a lot like *daikon*, a kind of radish from the island country where Kazuya was from.

“*Daikon*... or maybe a turnip,” he added. “Or a carrot. Either way, I believe curses and superstitions are just a bunch of nonsense. Most events can be explained logically, and to link them to curses and superstitions

without taking that into account is... Avril, are you listening? I was talking to you.”

Avril sat down on the grass and flipped through her favorite magazine, one that contained stuff about curses and superstitions. For some reason, Ms. Cecile also crouched down, hugging her knees, and cheerfully read the magazine together with her.

“Where’s the article about the mandrake?” Ms. Cecile asked.

“Give me a sec. It should be around page one-hundred.”

Heaving a sigh, Kazuya stood up. He turned away from them and started walking toward his original destination. He could hear happy shrieks and squeals coming from behind him.

“I really don’t understand girls.” Kazuya scratched his head.

Straightening his back, he started down the path to St. Marguerite’s Grand Library, the gravel crunching under his feet.

The library was filled with a serene silence today, too.

As Kazuya opened the leather swinging doors and stepped inside, he was greeted with the smell of intellect, dust, and silence. Every wall was lined with huge bookshelves. A mysterious, labyrinthine staircase, like a swarm of snakes, led all the way to the high ceiling adorned with majestic religious paintings.

Kazuya didn’t try to climb the stairs today. He only went to the secret conservatory at the top to see a girl, but he knew she hadn’t been there for the past few days.

The girl—Victorique de Blois, Europe’s Wellspring of Wisdom and a mysterious flower adorned with ruffles and laces—had been confined to her little house in the last several days. Her adventures in the eerie monastery of Beelzebub’s Skull on the Baltic coast and the transcontinental train ride home on the Old Masquerade had most likely given her a bit of a fever. So, for the past few days, Kazuya had been picking out books from the library and telling his bored friend strange stories—curious historical accounts that revolved around flowers.

“Hmm. What story should I tell her today?” Kazuya sighed as he looked up at the library’s gigantic bookshelves.

The walls, crammed with tens of thousands of books, issued an overwhelming, stifling ambience.

Kazuya climbed the stairs for a bit, then stopped. “That reminds me, what exactly is a mandrake? It *does* appear in folk tales a lot.”

Trotting up the stairs, he picked up a few books and sat down on the steps. He flipped through the pages, nodding to himself. A moment later, he stood up and tucked one of the books under his arm.

“Okay, let’s go with this one,” he muttered as he went back down. “I’ve got to hurry. If I take too much time, she’ll get grumpy.”

Straightening his back, Kazuya left the library and started walking down the gravel path once more.

The sun had gone down, casting gentle evening light on the trickling fountains and the white gravel pathway.

As he moved away from the library and returned to the same place as earlier, he heard the same hushed voices.

“Should we pull it out?”

“Good idea. Let’s give it a tug.”

“If it’s a real mandrake, it should let out a ghastly scream.”

“A ghastly scream?! Noooo!”

The pleated skirt of Avril’s uniform and the hem of Ms. Cecile’s long, white-gray skirt peeked out from within the bushes, swaying as they spoke.

Kazuya let out a sigh. As he walked past, he heard a “1, 2...” count, followed by the sound of something being pulled out.

Next came an otherworldly scream.

“Kyaaaahhh!”

Not the mandrake’s, but Avril’s, most likely.

Kazuya stopped and turned his gaze to them. The pair came tumbling out of the bushes.

“What was that just now?” Ms. Cecile asked.

“Th-That was me,” Avril replied. “But I thought I heard something else.”

“My ears were ringing.”

There was dirt on their faces and clothes. Exchanging glances, they swallowed.

A bird twittered in the distance.

It was a beautiful day, the setting sun pleasantly warm.

Avril and Ms. Cecile shrieked at the same time.

“Kyaaaahh!”

“It’s a curse!”

“Um, excuse me,” Kazuya called hesitantly. “What are you two on about?”

The women turned to him. Then, they tossed the large, dirty, carrot-looking thing they were holding.

Kazuya took it reluctantly.

“You can have it!”

“The mandrake is yours!”

“I don’t want it. Besides, this is a carrot...”

Kazuya’s face tightened as he remembered that there was someone waiting for him. With a muddy carrot in one hand and a book in the other, he went on his way.

He walked along the gravel path, away from the shrill voices, until he arrived at the flowerbed maze. With a familiar gait, he disappeared inside.

The wind blew, shaking the flowers in the flowerbeds a little wildly.

A squirrel scuttled across the path.

A quiet, evening garden.

Avril looked over her shoulder for no reason. Her eyes snapped wide.

“H-He’s gone!” She rested a muddy hand on her cheek. “Come to think of it, Kujou disappeared from there yesterday, too. I took my eyes off him for a second, and when I looked, he was already gone. How?”

Her short, golden hair stirred.

“Hmm...”

Avril was deep in thought for a while.

“Mandrake?”

“Yup.”

After wandering through the maze of flowerbeds, Kazuya finally arrived at the candy house.

He was talking to someone in a soft voice, elbows propped on the window sill and chin resting on his hand. The house was a two-story structure that looked like an elaborate dollhouse, where everything was built a size smaller. There was a pretty little spiral staircase outside. The door to the first floor was green, while the door to the second floor was pink. The doorknobs were shaped like a cat, looking up at visitors with round eyes shaped like almonds.

Kazuya was standing by the window of the candy house with his back straight.

“I never thought a single mandrake could cause so much ruckus,” replied an elderly-sounding, husky voice. “No wonder it sounded noisy outside.”

“You heard them all the way here? Hmm, they *were* screaming loudly.”

“I see the farting newt is still an oddball.”

There was no one in the room. Peering through the window, Kazuya saw an emerald-colored couch, where a porcelain doll lay, magnificent and exquisite as though decorated accordingly by its owner.

Her long golden hair, like an unfurled silk turban, was hanging down to the floor. She had rosy cheeks and deep green eyes. The girl looked like a living doll, her eyes the only thing moving occasionally on her cool, emotionless face. She was wearing an exotic dress made of jet-black French lace and a veil of thin black lace adorned with corals. Her bare feet, tiny, chubby, yet pale, swung up and down, as if trying to distract herself from boredom.

Chocolate bonbons, macarons, red and yellow and transparent candy bars in the shape of animals were scattered on the floor and cabriole-legged table.

Standing by the window, Kazuya waved the muddy carrot at the girl—Victorique de Blois.

“Are you there?” he asked.

“What in the world is that?”

“This is the mandrake in question.”

The blonde girl in black exhaled sharply. “That’s clearly a carrot.”

“Thought so. Definitely looks like one to me.”

“It looks like that to anyone.”

The girl yawned, seemingly bored. Her glossy, cherry lips slowly parted. Sluggishly she turned over on the couch. Her golden hair swished as it formed a magical pattern on the floor.

“Mandrake in Persian means ‘wildflower of love’. There’s no need to fear it,” Victorique said. “It’s just a kind of aphrodisiac. Some say it looks like a human being, with two legs and hair-like cilia.”

“But it doesn’t actually exist, right? It’s just a thing of legends.”

“Indeed.” Victorique gave him a glance. “It’s nothing but fantasy.” Her moist eyes turned to Kazuya. She still had a fever, it seemed. “There’s a legend that says it grows when the tears of an innocent in death row mix with soil. An evil vegetable with immense power, it screams when you pull it out. Those who hear the scream die, so criminals and animals are made to pull it out of the ground.”

“Avril and Ms. Cecile pulled it out earlier.”

“It’s a carrot. They’ll be fine.”

Victorique grinned. She rose slowly, then snatched the muddy carrot from Kazuya’s hand. Holding it with both hands, she brought it close to her eyes, scrutinizing it.

Kazuya smiled at the interest she showed. Then, he saw dirt falling from the carrot.

“Your dress is getting dirty.”

“...”

“It’s such a wonderful dress, too. You should keep it clean. Are you listening?”

“Oh, quit your nagging.”

Victorique wiped the surface of the carrot with her chubby fingers, then sniffed it. Wearing a perplexed look, she bit into the carrot with her tiny mouth.



“That’s raw!”

“...” Victorique was silent.

“Hello?”

“...”

Her brows knitted. She threw the carrot, and Kazuya quickly caught it mid-air.

“It tastes awful,” she said. “Unbelievably awful.”

“Because it’s raw. Do you even eat vegetables? You’re always nibbling on candies. You should eat a variety of foods. Bread, meat, vegetables. Are you even listening?”

Victorique turned her back to Kazuya wearily.

“Hello?”

“Nag.”

“Are you serious?”

“Pumpkin-head.”

“...”

“The Reaper.”

“Now, look here.”

“I will never eat carrots!”

“You can’t just eat what you want to eat. Eat some carrots too, okay?”

“I’d eat it if it were sweet.”

Victorique suddenly rose. She stared at Kazuya.

Kazuya instinctively straightened. She was small, yet she exuded the elegance of a queen. Her deep, melancholic green eyes looked like they belonged to an elderly who had lived for a hundred years. Though they had grown quite close, his friend still sometimes surprised him, as was the current case. As Kazuya stared back at her, Victorique, who looked like some lonely queen, pointed toward the doorway arrogantly.

“Come in through the front door.”

“What? You want me to come in? Are you sure?”

“Not in this room, of course. I am Victorique de Blois, and I will not be seen in the company of an insignificant mortal in my own home.”

“Says the one with the fever.”

Victorique grunted. “Stop whining and come inside. There’s a mini kitchen over there. Make me some glacé. What are you waiting for? Get on with it.” Her voice lowered. “I’m craving some carrot glacé.”

“It could be a mandrake, you know.”

“Impossible. Buffoon. Pumpkin-head. Get yourself to the kitchen, cut up some carrots, and boil them with sugar. Work like a servant. Come on, Kujou. Chop-chop.”

Kazuya clicked his tongue. “Fine. You sure come up with weird ideas out of nowhere, snotty brat.”

“Hmph!”

Kazuya, carrot and book in hand, reluctantly went inside.

Meanwhile, at the entrance to the flowerbed maze.

Avril Bradley stood alone under the light of the setting sun, looking confused. In front of her were colorful flowers in full bloom, swaying in stunning flowerbeds clearly shaped like a labyrinth.

She listened carefully.

But she couldn't hear anything.

“I believe it's here where he always disappears. But where does he go? Hmm...”

Avril inclined her head.

Then, without thinking too much about it, she nodded to herself.

“Let's just get in there for now.”

Several minutes later.

“H-Huh?”

Avril jumped out of the flowerbed maze, puzzled. She was completely stumped.

“I'm back outside. I got a bit lost.”

She looked confused.

“Let's give it another try.”

She entered the flowerbed maze once more.

Several minutes later.

“Huh?”

She came out.

“Argh, why? Where did Kujou go?” She cocked her head. “Somehow I think that Gray Wolf is behind this,” she huffed. “I'm not entirely sure why, but that incredibly pretty little demon is involved.”

She rolled up her sleeves.

“Again!”

Several more minutes later...

“Ugh...”

Avril stumbled out of the maze on the verge of tears, as though pushed out by some unseen force. Her short blonde hair and dashing uniform seemed to be in tatters. She placed a hand on the bench, the other on her hip, out of breath.

“What’s going on?!” she shouted.

She looked up at the evening sky.

“I hate mazes. They’re so confusing. I always get lost. Maybe it’s a curse? The Gray Wolf must be casting curses to keep others away. Cursed flowerbeds! Yeah, right...”

She hung her head, a little dejected.

“Ah...”

Avril slowly walked along white gravel path, away from the flowerbed maze, looking back a few times. The rosy evening sky shone on her softly.

“Hey, Victorique. Speaking of mandrakes.”

Kazuya was standing in the kitchen of the candy house, chopping carrots.

In the Orient, boys were not allowed in the kitchen after the age of ten, even if they had business with their mother. But there was no such rule in this country. Though a little hesitant, he knew that Victorique was waiting for him, and being a serious person by nature, he cut the carrots precisely, carefully rounded the edges, and put them in the pot.

As he began simmering it over a slow fire with sugar, he turned to the feverish Victorique, who was lying on the couch, looking bored.

“Speaking of mandrakes, I just read an old tale in the library that contained the plant. It’s a rather strange story from the warring times in China. What do you think, Victorique?”

Victorique gave a faint groan. Her expressionless face turned to him, her tiny nose twitching. She probably caught the nice aroma coming from the kitchen.

“Talk to me,” she said. “It will serve to stave off the boredom while the carrot is cooking.”

“Okay.” Kazuya nodded. He kept his eyes on the pot to make sure it didn’t burn. “We begin in the same land in the East from yesterday, and from there, we go further east via the Silk Road to the Chinese mainland. Walking along the Silk Road, we head much further back in time. It’s said that this story is the origin of the flower language of the mandrake.”

“I see.”

“Here I go, then. ‘A long, long time ago, the enormous continent of Asia was engulfed in the flames of war. Several nations perpetually fought over the vast land of China.’”

Victorique, lying on the couch, was staring up at the ceiling. It wasn’t clear whether she was listening or not. Her cheeks were bright red and slightly hot. Her tiny feet swung around, and her jet-black French lace dress shifted occasionally.

The wind blew outside the window, and a few dark-colored petals drifted into the evening sky.

A long, long time ago, the enormous continent of Asia was engulfed in the flames of war. Several nations perpetually fought over the vast land of China. Meanwhile, rare goods arrived from Persia and Turkey via the Silk Road, causing civilization to flourish.

This ancient tale begins with the story of a small tribe of horsemen in Mongolia, north of the Chinese mainland.

They rode horses, herded sheep, and lived in tents across the vast, dry continent, moving from west to east, depending on the season. The chief of the small tribe had several wives. One of them, the fifth wife, with golden hair and of foreign blood, had a beautiful child from a previous marriage, with golden hair like her own. Her child was female and fourteen years old. Her eyes were grayish, and she had a rare appearance not found among her people. She was quite pretty, but she was unruly, and would not listen to her father, the chief of the tribe. And for a people who married at an early age, she was an outlier, for she never loved anyone. Perhaps it was because of her golden hair, her gray eyes, or some other reason. For as long as she could remember, she had always felt like she didn’t belong.

The girl’s name was Bairen.

Every day, Bairen rode her horse across the northern lands. She was well-built for a fourteen-year-old, and the way she rode, with her golden

hair fluttering in the wind, was truly masterful. The chief once remarked that he wished she had been a boy. Indeed, her gray eyes seemed to hold a strong will, and he might have made a fine young chief had she been a man.

The sons of the second and third wives, in other words, Bairen's brothers-in-law, wanted Bairen as their wife. Living in a harsh natural environment, they preferred women who were strong and could bear many children. The girl, however, eluded their advances. Despite living in a gray, dry land, her eyes had always been set on other places—a world yet unseen beyond the Silk Road, or China, with its warring, gorgeous culture.

One day, however, a terrible fate befell Bairen. Her mother, the fifth wife, had fallen ill.

Tribal law dictated that as a stepdaughter, Bairen had to become the new fifth wife of the chief when her mother died. But the chief was three times older than she was; she could not see him as a husband. Bairen trembled every day as she lay on her mother's bed.

Ten days later, Bairen's mother passed away, and she had to become the chief's fifth wife.

Bairen prayed to the god of the earth. She pleaded to be taken somewhere else. She didn't want to be the wife of a much older man and have no freedom, serving only to give birth to a child, raise them, and then crumble to dust in the end. One night while she was praying, a man came from across the land.

It was a middle-aged man, riding a horse and wearing unfamiliar clothes. He had a black mustache and a horrifying face like some evil demon, but when he saw Bairen, he smiled broadly.

"You're the spitting image of your mother," the man said.

The man was a warlord of a nation in distant China. He said that he learned about her mother's death, and had come to take her daughter away.

"Why?" Bairen asked. "Do you know my mother?"

"I am your father. She fled this far north with her child because she was afraid that I might use her."

Bairen was shocked.

But she was also captivated by the man's fine looks. She was fascinated by the land of China, a land she had never seen before. She looked back at the clan's tents, where they were preparing for the wedding. The young

Bairen had no attachments to this land. Bidding farewell to her mother in her heart, she and the man set off on horseback.

A few days later, they arrived at a gorgeous Chinese city.

The sun had long set outside, and the glow of a rosy evening enveloped the surroundings. The lace curtains swayed softly in the faint breeze.

“Don’t burn it now,” Victorique said wearily.

“R-Right.”

Kazuya looked into the pot. The glacé was glittering a delicious orange color.

He nodded. “All good.”

“I see. Very well, then.” There was a hint of excitement in Victorique’s voice. The sweet aroma of carrots filled the room. Her small, pretty nose twitched. “On a different note, I did not hear about any mandrake in your story at all.”

“J-Just wait a bit. A little later, the Chinese warlord will die. Then the mandrake will grow.”

“It hasn’t grown yet? What a long-winded story.” Victorique sounded unusually relaxed.

“Anyway, Bairen and the warlord made it to China. Then, Bairen encounters a young man, and the warlord dies.”

“Hmm.”

“I’ll continue.”

Dusk thickened, its light shining on the candy house. The colorful flowers in the surroundings began to close their petals to prepare for the approaching late-summer night.

The land of China was a magnificent city, so gorgeous that it made one instantly forget about life in the dry lands of the north. Silks, jade, colorful buildings. Women with their glossy, black hair tied up high, and fashionable men.

The warlord secretly told Bairen about a young man. His name was Yuki, the warlord’s son and heir. Bairen found herself fascinated by this young man, who could be her older brother. Yuki was a very elegant and beautiful man, with black hair and almond-shaped eyes. He was an officer in the government, but his father wanted him to rise above him and rule the

country. Bairen decided to join the royal court as a servant. She went in and out of the castle freely, where only women were allowed to enter, and eavesdropped on the bedchamber conversations between the king and his wives. Together with her father, she decided to help gather information for Yuki's promotion. She wondered if this was exactly what her mother feared, but she didn't think she was being used. She was simply captivated by the sight of Yuki, with whom she had never exchanged a single word.

Two years passed.

Yuki rose steadily through the ranks, while his father became a renowned military commander. One day, however, a long-time political enemy led the man into a trap, and he was sentenced to death without getting the chance to clear his name.

Bairen ran to her father, who had been arrested. From his prison cell, her father appealed to her.

"After I'm gone, you must make Yuki the leader of this land."

Bairen gave him her word.

The next morning, her father was beheaded. That night, Bairen snuck into the courtyard of the royal palace, dripping with blood and tears, and found Yuki there too. The two finally met.

"Who are you?" Yuki asked.

Bairen did not answer. She didn't know what to say.

"I... I am your shadow."

"Shadow? Mine?"

"Yes. I worked with your father."

Yuki stared at the unusual golden hair and dark gray eyes that held fervor.

At that time, Bairen found a strange, black plant growing out of the ground. She had never seen it before. She remembered the legend of the mandrake, the rumor of a mysterious plant that came along the Silk Road.

A cursed plant that grew when the tears of an innocent sentenced to death fell to the ground.

Yuki said that now that his father was gone and he had no one to back him up, he would not be able to climb any higher up the ranks.

Bairen shook her head. "We still have a last resort. See this mandrake?"

After receiving a lock of Yuki's hair, Bairen pulled out the mandrake, grown from her father's tears, and used it according to legends. She made a

cursed aphrodisiac.

There was a saying that the one who made the aphrodisiac would be cursed themselves, but Bairen didn't care. She would fall victim to the curse, not Yuki.

Bairen mashed and boiled the pitch-black plant, turning it into a red-colored juice that splashed vigorously out of the pot. One drop entered Bairen's mouth. Shocked, she quickly rinsed it out. Then, she returned to the palace and gave it to the princess, the king's only heir, to drink.

The princess liked Yuki, whom she had met at a function at the royal palace. Yuki himself was a brilliant official. Their marriage proceeded smoothly.

After that, Yuki became a fine king, fighting bravely and steadily expanding his territory.

Yuki lived happily with the princess and fathered many children, but when it came time for battle, he always brought along a mysterious female warlord with golden hair. Her origins were a mystery. It was said that she was from a northern tribe of horsemen, but her hair and eyes were like those of a foreigner from far to the west, beyond the Silk Road. Her presence as she dashed through the sandy lands on her black horse, her golden hair fluttering in the wind, struck fear in the hearts of the enemy, as though she was a foreign goddess of war. She remained unmarried for the rest of her life, devoting herself solely to battle.

"I am cursed. The mandrake's curse could come at any moment. So I will not marry. I will have no children. I will serve only as the king's shadow."

The woman was reported to have said this to a certain warlord, who spoke to her one night before battle.

Twenty years passed. The country, its territory now doubled in size, was enjoying a period of prosperity. There were no more wars. Then, the female warlord, who had accompanied the king like a shadow, fell ill.

She was running a high fever, and bizarre red spots, similar to the one that had sputtered from the mandrake pot and entered her mouth, appeared all over her pale body. The female warlord kept muttering that the curse had struck, but the ladies-in-waiting tending to her never learned what she meant.

The female warlord grew delirious and started having visions. Nightmares of mandrake plagued her night after night.

One day, the king came to her sickbed for a short visit. The female warlord tried to get up, but to no avail. The king gently stroked the bedridden woman's long golden hair, now streaked with white, over and over again.

"Thank you for your service over the years," the king said. "I am what I am today because of you."

"It was an honor to serve you, my king. Before I met you, I was someone without aspirations, without a purpose, without a place to belong. When I met you, I made it my purpose to make you king. You were my aspiration. I lived the life I wanted."

"Bairen..." The king trailed off, hesitated for a moment. "Are you truly my sister?"

"There is no way of knowing now." Bairen laughed. "I simply believed what that man claiming to be my father told me. My mother was gone and there was no way to be certain, but I believed what I wanted to believe."

"I see. Then I shall believe what I want to believe too, sister."

"Brother... Farewell."

"Farewell, my dear."

Thus they bade goodbye forever. For the next twenty days, Bairen spent her days in a delirious state, but this time there were no more nightmares about the black mandrake.



She dreamed of herself as a little girl, running alone across the dry land of the north, a place she had abandoned long ago. Far away she ran, her long golden hair flowing in the wind.

After twenty days of fighting her illness, Bairen passed away. Shortly before she turned forty years old. She was given a respectful burial as a brave warlord, and entombed in the suburbs with a view of the northern lands.

The mandrake's curse left Bairen alone as she assisted the king, and after twenty years, suddenly struck and took the woman away. Since then, there had been various tragedies involving the mandrake throughout history.

It was said that the mandrake's signification, 'fascination', came from the last days of this golden-haired, goddess of war, Bairen.

The carrots were cooked.

Rosy dusk was encroaching outside, its light softly illuminating Victorique, who was lying on the couch, wrapped in jet-black French laces. Kazuya removed the pot off the fire and placed the glistening carrots on a white plate.

"The end," he said. "And that's the story about the mandrake, in a faraway place a long, long time ago."

Victorique gave a soft grunt in response and slowly rose from the couch. Barefoot, she trotted to the kitchen where Kazuya was.

In a very earnest manner, Kazuya carefully arranged the carrots on the plate.

"The battlefield was probably filthy and full of rats," Victorique said. "No wonder she got typhoid fever."

"Typhoid fever? Who?" Kazuya asked, surprised.

Victorique, her nose twitching, seemed enthralled by the carrot glacé, so splendidly prepared thanks to the cook's earnest and meticulous nature. She showed no signs of answering.

"What do you mean by typhoid fever?" Kazuya repeated.

"Hmm?" Victorique eyed him curiously. "The goddess of war in the story died of typhoid fever, didn't she?"

"Wait, really?"





Victorique held out her hands, and Kazuya quickly handed the plate of carrots to her. Gently he placed a silver fork with the handle in the shape of a swan on it. Then he picked up the book and flipped through the pages.

“There’s no mention of it anywhere,” he said.

Victorique was munching on her food.

“Hey, Victorique.”

Munch.

“Is the glacé good?”

“...Ahuh.”

Sitting on a chair, Victorique was dangling her legs as she brought the sweet glacé to her mouth. Kazuya waited patiently for her to talk.

Victorique cast him a sidelong glance. “Argh, fine,” she said reluctantly. “I’ll explain it to you, then.”

“O-Okay.”

“Bairen contracted typhoid fever on the battlefield. It’s a disease that is common in places with poor sanitation. A recent case, I believe, was during the Boer War at the turn of the last century, when the British invaded South Africa over its gold and diamond deposits. At that time, the death toll of the British army exceeded 10,000 from typhoid, while casualties in battle numbered only 8,000. Apparently, there were plenty of cases at some point in the cities of the New World too, where there were many immigrants. The red spots on Bairen’s body is a characteristic of typhoid fever.”

“Really... I didn’t know that.” Kazuya nodded.

Victorique put down her fork. “Yes, really,” she continued in her deep, husky voice. “Symptoms of typhoid fever include high fever, red spots, and delirium, a state of mind filled with hallucinations and dreams. The visions and nightmares that Bairen saw were probably a result of that.”

“I see.”

“In an asymptomatic carrier, the incubation period of typhoid bacteria could be long. Perhaps Bairen had been a carrier since her time in the North. While she was devoting herself to her brother, the bacteria remained dormant, and once she thought her brother would no longer need her help, she might have let her guard down, causing the bacteria to become active. Either way, it’s a disease that could trigger at any time. It wasn’t the mandrake’s curse.”

“Then how did the princess fall in love with Bairen’s brother?”

“The answer is simple: love. Yuki was quite the looker. Anything related to the mandrake is pure superstition.”

Victorique resumed eating the glacé. Sweetened carrots, cut into bite-size pieces, vanished into her tiny mouth. Kazuya watched her for a while.

“So you eat carrots if they’re sweet,” Kazuya said softly.

“I do.”

“You like it boiled in sugar? What about chestnut glacé?”

“I like it,” Victorique said matter-of-factly.

Kazuya gave a nod.

A square window separated the tiny candy house from the dusky landscape outside, where colorful flowers swayed in the breeze.

“Fascination,” Victorique muttered.

“Hmm?”

“It’s what the mandrake signifies. What spurred the girl, Bairen, was a longing for a world she had never seen before. Her fascination for a man who claimed to be her real father. Her affection for her beautiful brother. The thrill of battle. People are fascinated by all sorts of things, and like butterflies drawn to the fragrance of flowers, they wander the world like phantoms.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Kazuya agreed.

“Not like a dimwitted blockhead like you would understand.”

“I-I do understand. Flowers, pretty and enigmatic things...” Kazuya paused, pondering. “I know what it feels like to be thrilled about things that can’t be explained by logic. I also know that such things can influence people to make significant choices.”

“Indeed.” Victorique nodded.

Kazuya picked up a piece of glacé from the white plate. The carrot was remarkably sweet; a flavor that he could not understand filled his mouth like a sweet nightmare.

“It’s sweet!”

“That’s what makes it delicious.”

Coughing, Kazuya managed to swallow the sweet carrot. He chuckled. Victorique gave him an inquiring look.

Kazuya smiled. “To sum it up, you’re fascinated by books and sugar. I mean, you eat this stuff.”

Victorique snorted in response. She popped a carrot glacé into her mouth. A brief smile flashed across her cold, expressionless face, then vanished, as though sucked into the world beyond.

Kazuya smiled.

The wind blew.

The flowers in their beds stirred, and dark petals soared into the evening sky.

Chapter 4 [Remembrance]: A Tale of Yellow Edelweiss —America, 1627—

A sunny weekend afternoon.

St. Marguerite Academy.

The slightly faded grass stirred in the soft and cool autumn breeze. Chilly water trickling down the white fountain occasionally splashed droplets on passing students. The days were getting shorter. The huge U-shaped school building cast a long, faint shadow over the garden.

It was the beginning of autumn.

Footsteps sounded in the boys' dormitory located in a corner of the campus, the steady, rhythmical clacking suggesting it belonged to an earnest student. A small-built boy, an international student from the Orient, turned down the hallway, keeping his back straight.

The boy—Kazuya Kujou—had just returned to St. Marguerite Academy with Victorique a week ago. He went to pick up his friend, who was locked up in the seaside monastery Beelzebub's Skull, and took the train Old Masquerade on the way back. After surviving all the incidents that had befallen them, they finally made it back home, but Victorique had been listless all week, and had even stopped going to the library, a daily routine of hers. Every day Kazuya went to Victorique's special dormitory located behind a flowerbed maze to check on her.

Catching the sound of Kazuya's footsteps down the hallway, Sophie's ears twitched. The dorm mother was in the large kitchen on the first floor, with her sleeves rolled up. Cream, lemon, and flour were all around her. A grin appeared on her freckled face. Her red ponytail swung as she dashed out into the hallway, her beautiful legs showing through her matching red dress.

Coming down the stairs, Kazuya was just passing by the kitchen. He looked as stubborn as ever, though with a somewhat timid expression on his face and a slightly slumped posture. The corridors were full of children of

the nobility on this sunny weekend, chatting among themselves. As Kazuya weaved his way through the students, Sophie grabbed him and pulled him into the kitchen.

“Got you!”

Wearing a grave look, Kazuya inadvertently let out a girly yelp. He turned red.

“Oh, it’s just you,” he said. “For the record, I wasn’t startled.”

“It’s okay. I meant to startle you.”

“Boys don’t scream over something like this—”

“Here you go.”

“Huh? What’s this?”

Sophie handed Kazuya a bowl of freshly extracted cream and gestured for him to stir it.

Kazuya looked puzzled. “I, uhh... gotta go to the library and see my friend.”

“Help me out here, okay?” Sophie pressed. “I don’t have a lot of time. I’m supposed to have a tea party with Cecile this afternoon, but I couldn’t make the cake in time.”

“A tea party with Ms. Cecile?” Kazuya nodded. “That sounds fun.”

“It *is* fun. Cecile is so good at mimicking the headmaster and the chairman. I don’t know how she’s so good at that. Come on. Don’t think, just stir.”

“But I...”

Sophie juggled three glistening yellow lemons. She tossed one into the air, deftly caught it, then tossed the next one.

She grinned at Kazuya. “We’re making lemon cake! It tastes like first love, sweet and sour.”

“First love...”

Holding the bowl with both hands, Kazuya’s face turned a little red.

“That’s right. I’ll give you half when it’s done. Okay?”

“Half?!”

Kazuya immediately put on a serious face and began stirring the cream in a steady, methodical motion. Sophie studied his face quizzically, wondering if he ever loved cake. He was even humming a tune while stirring the cream. His earnestness paid off as the cream turned splendidly smooth, smelling like sweet vanilla.

Kazuya's humming drifted through the kitchen. Sophie started singing a cheerful Irish folk song along with him. The kitchen was filled with the sweet aroma of a cake nearing completion and strange songs.

An hour later...

"This cake looks incredibly delicious. I'm sure that mean, moody little devil Victorique will be happy. Mysteries are good and all, but she just collapses when she gets too hungry. Cake, cake!"

Kazuya was walking through the garden, back straight, holding a plate of lemon cake with both hands.

Squirrels occasionally scuttled across the white gravel path, squeaking.

"Cake, cake..."

He stepped onto the grass to get to the library faster.

"Kujou!" reprimanded an adorable, childish voice.

Kazuya stopped dead in his tracks. "I'm sorry! Wait. I apologized without even knowing what I did wrong. I need to keep my wits about me. What is it?"

A woman crouching on the lawn, holding a tiny kid's shovel, was frowning at him. It was Ms. Cecile, with her shoulder-length brown hair and round glasses. Her large, slightly droopy, puppy-dog eyes were moist.

Ms. Cecile pointed at a spot on the grass. "Watch for the violets!"

"Violets? Oh, sorry. I didn't notice."

A few violet flowers were blooming there. She was swinging her arms around, holding a shovel in one hand, and what seemed like flower seeds in the other. She was angry.

"Why do boys not notice these little flowers?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not exactly refined."

"But when it comes to manual labor, young men are the best for the job. My arms are getting tired."

"I agree. Young men are indeed... Wait. Did you say manual labor?"

Kazuya found himself being handed a shovel and forced to dig in the dirt.

"Dig here. And also here," Ms. Cecile said sternly. "We're going to make a flowerbed here. That should prevent people from stepping on the flowers."

Kazuya planted seeds in the holes.

The autumn wind blew. Leaves fell slowly onto the grass.

“Make sure you fill the holes back once you’re done planting the seeds.”

“Yes, Teach.”

“...”

“You can’t have the cake. It’s for Victorique.”

“Oh, you were watching.”

Ms. Cecile quickly pulled her hand back from the plate. There was a gulp.

“One bite.”

“No!”

“You there!” A loud, guttural voice sounded.

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile looked over their shoulders.

The large, old gardener came running up to them. His skin was thick as leather, his tanned face crimson.

“What are you two doing, digging holes?! So you’re the ones who made all those flowerbeds! Digging and digging, ruining all the effort I put on this garden. Get back here, Cecile!”

Kazuya turned and saw Ms. Cecile scurrying away at full speed, hands in the air.

“Teach!” Kazuya tried to follow her, but he was carrying a cake. And he couldn’t turn his back to the angry gardener. So he stayed behind.

“I-I’m sorry!” he said, bending at the waist at a ninety-degree angle. “I’ll fix it.”

The gardener was taken aback. “No, it’s fine. I bet it was all Cecile’s idea anyway. She’s still as fast as ever. She hasn’t changed since she was a student.” He sighed.

More leaves slowly fell around Kazuya.

“Phew. Talk about bad luck. Will I even make it to Victorique’s place today?”

Holding the plate of cake, Kazuya started walking toward the library, when he spotted a girl with short blonde hair lying on the bench.

“Ah!” he yelped.

Her long, radiant legs extending through her school uniform glistened in the autumn sun. Her eyes, clear as the blue sky, were wide open as she read

the newspaper. The words “Sir Bradley Jr. Finally Completes the London Subway!” were printed on the front page in huge letters.

Sensing trouble, Kazuya proceeded stealthily. As he slowly walked past the bench, a little squirrel with a mouth full of nuts stopped and looked up at him, tilting its head. Its tiny body, round and cute eyes, and expressionless, yet adorable face brought a chuckle from Kazuya. The squirrel let out a small squeak, then climbed up Kazuya’s pants.

“Ahaha... That tickles. Ah, get out of my back. Oh, it’s out. Oh, crap!”

He saw that the girl with short blonde hair and blue eyes—Avril Bradley—had risen from the bench and was staring at him with her round eyes.

“Hello, Avril,” Kazuya greeted uneasily.

“You’re...”

“Nice weather we’re having, huh? See you later.”

“Carrying a cake...”

“So anyway, I’m uh... in a bit of a hurry...”

“You’re carrying a cake and you’re in a hurry...?”

Avril’s eyebrow rose. Kazuya took a step back.

Slowly, Avril folded the newspaper and placed it on her head, for some reason.

She’s putting stuff on her head again, Kazuya thought with trepidation.

Avril sometimes put weird things on her head. The golden skull, for one. She also acted strange, getting angry and chasing after him, or running away. For reasons that Kazuya found completely absurd.

“I get it,” she said. “You’re taking the cake to the Gray Wolf. Not on my watch!”

“Wh-Why not?! Why do you care so much about Victorique? Ow! D-Did you just throw a rock at me? That’s dangerous.”

“Wait!”

Unsure what was going on, Kazuya scurried away like Cecile did, the squirrel riding on his shoulder, and headed straight to St. Marguerite’s Grand Library. Opening the leather swinging door, he jumped inside, and locked the door. For a while Avril kept shouting outside.

“Come out here! Kujou, you dummy!”

Eventually, quiet returned.

Kazuya breathed a sigh as he sank to the floor, still holding the plate of cake.

Relieved, he looked up at the ceiling. Majestic fresco paintings glittered far above on the high ceiling. The huge bookshelves that covered the walls of the library seemed to bend a little and peer at him, asking him what was wrong. Feeling insignificant, Kazuya sighed.

Victorique was not in the library again today. There was no sign of any living thing from the secret conservatory atop the intricate, labyrinthine stairs.

I guess she's still in her little dorm behind the flowerbeds. It looked like she was feeling a lot better. Kazuya stood up. *I should bring another book to the candy house.*

"I wonder, though," he mumbled. "Why did I run into so much trouble on my way to Victorique? What a weird day."

He started up the meandering stairs.

"One book should do. She must be bored."

A few steps up the stairs, the squirrel on his shoulder jumped over to the bookshelf, causing a book to fall on Kazuya's head.

"Ouch! Not the book's spine... Almost dropped the cake. Let's see here."

Before he put the book back on the shelf, he flipped through the pages.

"What do we have here? 'Beatrice's Yellow Flower Garden. Biography of a Businesswoman Who Made a Fortune from Edelweiss'. Sounds interesting."

He read for a while, nodding to himself. The squirrel on his shoulder was also peering at the pages, as though reading with him.

"So this woman named Beatrice worked hard to make flowerbeds in the ancient past. Then she made a fortune out of it. Hmm... I guess girls really are into flowers. Ms. Cecile was fired up about making a flowerbed."

Kazuya closed the book and tucked it under his arm. Carrying the plate of cake, he went down the stairs.

"Cake, and a book," he told the squirrel. "I'll pick some flowers, then I can finally see Victorique. And it only took a lot of effort."

The squirrel squeaked happily in response.

Meanwhile, in the garden.

"Kujou was walking with a cake, all smiles. It's definitely for the Gray Wolf."

Avril was sitting on the bench with a frown on her face. Her foul mood ruined her pretty face, and she still had the newspaper on top of her head.

Girls passing by tried calling out to her, but they all swallowed their words.

“There’s something on her head.”

“That means she’s in an awful mood. Stay away from her.”

“God help us.”

The girls quietly kept their distance.

Still wearing a frown, Avril shook her head. The newspaper remained steady, as if it were taped to her head, with no sign of falling. She heaved another forlorn sigh.

“...Ah!”

She spotted Kazuya coming back through the gravel path. He had a thick book under his arm, still holding the cake. The same squirrel was perched on his shoulder.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know where the Gray Wolf usually spends her time. I can’t even be mean to her. Oh, how I want to pull her hair again and call her a monster. All right. Today’s the day!”

Avril hid behind the bench and crouched down.

Kazuya was coming closer, humming a tune. He didn’t notice Avril hiding. But the squirrel on his shoulder was staring grimly at the shaky newspaper peeking out from behind the bench, blinking. Its mouth, packed full of nuts, wriggled.

Avril, hiding her head but not the newspaper, watched Kazuya walk past with the sharp eyes of a female spy.

Kazuya stopped in front of the flowerbed maze, inclining his head.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

He plucked off a few yellow flowers and placed them softly on the plate holding the lemon cake. He nodded, then vanished into the flowerbed maze in an instant, as though sucked inside.

“...Kujou?”

Avril bolted to her feet. Newspaper still on her head, she ran, stopping in front of the flowerbeds.

“I knew it! He disappeared here yesterday too. And the day before yesterday. That means the Gray Wolf... Victorique is inside these flowerbeds!”

She sighed, and the newspaper fell from her head. She caught it in a fluid motion.

“But I got lost inside yesterday. I can’t just go in all willy-nilly.”

A moment later, she nodded firmly.

“All right. Once night falls, I’m going on an adventure inside the flowerbed maze. The blood of Adventurer Sir Bradley runs in my veins! As long as I go in prepared, I’ll be fine. I’ll head all the way inside and pull Victorique’s hair!”

Avril nodded cheerfully and looked up at the maze.

A sudden wind, carrying petals, blew against Avril in resistance.

“Victorique! Hello?”

Meanwhile...

Kazuya had arrived at the candy house on the other side of the flowerbed maze. He was standing in front of the tiny structure, calling out the name of his friend diffidently.

“Are you there? I didn’t see any sign of you in the library, so I thought you’d still be here. Did your fever go down? Hello?”

The two-story building looked as small as a dollhouse, with a green ornate door. Kazuya gently opened the first-floor window and peered into the living room. There was no one on the green couch, and on the chest lay an empty strawberry-shaped plate. The roses and tulips that Kazuya had given her a few days back were sitting inside a glass.

But the master of the house was nowhere to be found.

“Victorique.”

“...”

“Hey.”

“...”

“I brought lemon cake.”

“...”

From somewhere far, a little higher up, came a faint groan. Kazuya leaned further into the window and stared at the living room. The small oak door was currently open, revealing a narrow hallway leading to the bedroom. At the end of the hallway was a small, perilous spiral staircase, with an intricate design of intertwining ivy.

As Kazuya fixed his eyes on it, something fell from atop the staircase. He blinked.

It was a tiny pink macaroon. Cherry-flavored, he was sure.

“Victorique, are you up there?”

“Can you keep it down?”

There came a grumpy, husky voice, yet tinged with delight, and Victorique toddled down the stairs.





Her right cheek was puffed up like a squirrel's mouth stuffed with nuts. The white stick of a lollipop was peeking out the edge of her cherry lips. Holding a thick book in one hand and a white ceramic pipe on the other, she glanced at Kazuya. She was wearing a ruffled, puffy white dress and pink ballet slippers. Her magnificent golden hair, glittering like silk threads, cascaded down to the floor from her white bonnet made of lace.

The squirrel on Kazuya's shoulder let out a small squeak, then scuttled along the window sill, jumped over to the couch and onto the floor with a nimbleness that Kazuya could never manage, and landed on top of Victorique's head. It gave a short, triumphant squeak.

Unmindful of the squirrel on her head, Victorique looked at Kazuya, her bulging cheeks wriggling.

"Where is it?" she asked.

"You look well," Kazuya replied. "Good. Your fever must've gone down, then. Hmm? What are you asking about?"

"Where's the lemon cake?"

"Oh, it's right here."

Kazuya lifted the plate and bowed grandly, like some waiter. Then his face paled. If his father and brothers saw this flirtatious gesture, they would probably strip him naked, tie him with a rope and hang him from an upstairs window.

Victorique gave him a weird look. The squirrel's eyes narrowed too.

"I suppose you're at that age," she said.

"You're saying that like we're not of similar age. For the record: we're classmates. Now sit here and have your cake. I helped make it, so the dorm mother gave me half. And one more thing..." Kazuya's face reddened a bit. "Here's some flowers."

"Thank you. Your effort is appreciated."

Victorique took the bouquet of yellow flowers. For a while she just stared at them with a cool, emotionless face; it was hard to tell what she thought about it. Then she placed it carefully in the glass with the roses and tulips, turning it into a lovely, colorful flower vase. Victorique's gaze was fixed on it.

A while later, she brought a small piece of lemon cake to her mouth, cut using a silver fork in the shape of a white horse. The squirrel on top of her

head was also chewing on something. Victorique's eyes never left the vase even as she was eating.

Resting his elbow by the window, Kazuya watched her curiously.

"Victorique?" he called.

"What is it?"

"Are you, by any chance, more bored than usual?"

"I am."

"You've been staring at those flowers forever. But that also means you're feeling a lot better. I'm glad."

"Ahuh."

Victorique turned her face, slowly and languidly, over at Kazuya. Then she directed her gaze back to the vase. Chewing on her cake, she kept staring at the flowers with her glazed green eyes.

After watching her for a while, Kazuya said, "I hope you don't mind if I read a book aloud, then."

Cheeks stuffed with cake, Victorique shot him a glance. The squirrel, letting out a curious squeak, turned to Kazuya as well.

"What kind of book is it?" Victorique asked.

"It's a story about yellow flowers. It's called 'Beatrice's Yellow Flower Garden. Biography of a Businesswoman Who Made a Fortune from Edelweiss'."

"Beatrice's Yellow Flower Garden? The title rings a bell."

Victorique's face took on a curious look. Her golden locks shifted, forming patterns on the floor.

Kazuya nodded. "It's the name of a famous florist in the New World. It's now a very big company, with branches everywhere. The founder was a successful businesswoman named Beatrice Baran, who was born in England about three hundred years ago. It goes without saying that she's long dead. This is a mysterious success story about flowers, as seen through the eyes of her adoptive mother."

"Hmm." Victorique nodded, eating cake. "I'm hardly interested in any of that success story nonsense, but go on. Read it. If nothing else, it will serve to stave off my boredom."

"Okay."

Straightening his posture, Kazuya held the book up with both hands. Victorique plopped down on the emerald-colored couch and stretched like a

lazy kitten. Her tiny body, hidden inside the ruffles, stretched surprisingly long, then curled up again.

Her green eyes, cool as jewels, flickered as she looked at Kazuya. Her fever seemed to have gone down considerably; her cheeks had regained their rosy hue. She cleared her throat, as though urging him to hurry up. The squirrel, too, let out a squeak.

Kazuya straightened his back and started reading aloud.

“We all have parents.

That includes me. You. Everyone else.

You probably get asked this a lot. Who do you take after?

Your strict father? Gentle mother?

An idealistic father? Or a pragmatic mother?

Depending on what kind of parents they have, children may have different feelings about which one they want to be like. This is that kind of story. It’s about my adopted daughter, Beatrice Baran, and which of her parents she took after.

Beatrice was born to parents of extremely different personalities, but she inherited the qualities of one of them so strongly that she made a fortune and lived a happy life in the New World.”

Kazuya’s eyes took on a distant look as he recalled his own parents. His strict father, his gentle mother. Two big, strong brothers, who took after their father.

A hint of rumination seemed to appear in Victorique’s cold, dim eyes. She yawned.

“Go on,” she said softly.

“Okay.”

Kazuya straightened his posture and continued reading.

A little bird landed on the flowerbed maze and started singing.

We all have parents.

That includes me. You. Everyone else.

You probably get asked this a lot. Who do you take after?

Your strict father? Gentle mother?

An idealistic father? Or a pragmatic mother?

Depending on what kind of parents they have, children may have different feelings about which one they want to be like. This is that kind of

story. It's about my adopted daughter, Beatrice Baran, and which of her parents she took after.

Beatrice was born to parents of extremely different personalities, but she inherited the qualities of one of them so strongly that she made a fortune and lived a happy life in the New World.

First of all, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Rene. I lived in a rural town in Germany until 1627. I never married, and instead took care of my parents, who passed away from illness when I was thirty years old. In the same year, my sister, who had been away from home for a long time, returned with a filthy fourteen-year-old daughter, and after leaving her in my care, she disappeared again.

That's the kind of person my sister was. Impulsive and unable to settle down in one place. When she was still in her teens, she fell in love with an older man and left home, but the man's family disapproved of her, and she disappeared. Unbeknownst to me, she had given birth to the man's child, and had struggled to raise it. I reluctantly decided to adopt and raise the filthy girl my sister left behind. Deep inside, I was very worried. The man my sister fell in love with was a young, but skilled merchant. I wonder which of her parents she resembled more. Her impulsive and foolish mother, or her skilled father?

This was how I met my adopted daughter, Beatrice Baran, who later became a well-known businesswoman. In the end, my fears were unfounded, but it took me a long time to realize that.

There's a reason for it.

Which I'm going to write about in a bit.

Now that I'm old, it takes time to remember the past. My handwriting is shaky, not because I am not used to writing. It's because of my old age. My hand holding the pen cannot muster much strength. It is now the year 1698. I am over a hundred years old. How in the world did I live so long?

No. Never mind that.

Old people tend to go on a tangent when telling stories.

What you want to read is the secret behind Beatrice's success. Everyone wants to follow in her footsteps. Nowadays, every young person in the New World wants to be successful. They carry not some hidden pride in their hearts, nor a lofty spirit, but a dream of success in the business world of this new world, America. That's probably why the young publisher came to me,

an old lady, and asked me to write a book about the secret to Beatrice's success story.

But if it will help the younger generation, then I will gladly share it.

Ah, I got sidetracked again. This is why people don't like the elderly.

I have to start from when I met my adopted daughter Beatrice. The secret to her success lay in one thing: which of her parents she took after.

My sister was beautiful in her younger days. The fourteen-year-old girl she had left behind was dirty and smelled funny when I met her, but when I bathed her thoroughly in some warm water, she turned out to be a surprisingly pretty girl, more mature than her age, with long curly blonde hair falling down her back, and big gray eyes. *Not good*, I had thought. She looked just like my sister. No, worse. She was the spitting image of her. I assumed she was impulsive and a slob, just like her mother.

I tried to raise her strictly, but immediately I suffered a setback.

Beatrice could not speak. At first I thought her silence was her way of rebelling against my strict upbringing, but when I saw her bright, gray eyes moist with sadness as she shook her head repeatedly, I knew something was wrong. So I took her to the doctor. When they told me that the child was mute, I fell into despair. How could I raise a child who was mute? It was unfamiliar territory, and I was at a loss. First of all, communication was difficult. I didn't even know if she understood what I taught her.

Beatrice spent her days like her mind was somewhere else. I couldn't even tell how much she understood. But her beauty, which she inherited from her mother, soon became the talk of the town. When she walked through town with her long, curly blond hair, boys followed her like butterflies to a flower. As a devout Puritan, I despised the persistence of these insincere heathens. One boy in particular, a little older than Beatrice, worked in a flower shop. His unappealing, freckled face grew darker by the day as he pursued Beatrice.

Soon...

"Huh? Victorique?"

A bird twittered.

Kazuya, leaning against the window, looked inside the house. Victorique was lying on the emerald couch, her eyes closed. The squirrel, half-buried in her silky golden hair, looked sleepy too.

Victorique's long eyelashes quivered, and she slowly opened her eyes.

"Are you sleepy?" Kazuya asked.

"Hmm."

"I get it. Your stomach's full from the lemon cake."

"The old lady keeps going on a tangent."

"You can hardly blame her. She's over a hundred years old."

"...I suppose. When is the flower shop opening?"

"In a bit. Soon after this, Beatrice will board a ship to the New World."

"I see. Go on, continue."

"Okay. Here I go. Beatrice is about to board a ship. 'Six months passed...'"

Fixing his posture, Kazuya resumed reading.

The squirrel crawled inside Victorique's long and wavy golden hair and vanished.

A cool autumn breeze blew outside the dollhouse, stirring the flowers in the beds.

Birds chirped in the distance.

Six months passed, and I decided to emigrate to the New World. I was fascinated by the idea of crossing the sea, developing new land and building a village, but above all, I was concerned about Beatrice's future. If we stayed in Hamburg, people would eventually find out that she was a child born out of wedlock. I feared that when she reached adulthood, she would have difficulty finding a partner. I would probably die of old age first, and the thought of my mute daughter's future made me anxious.

The migration of the Puritans to the New World was just beginning during this time. It was a huge undertaking: boarding a ship and sailing across the vast sea to establish a new nation. I decided to go with my daughter. Reclamation would require labor, and we might be able to hide Beatrice's past. When I told her this, she looked worried and shook her head, but I couldn't tell from studying her face what she thought about it or whether she even understood what I meant.

When it became known that we were emigrating, the adults said nothing, while the boys came to see Beatrice to say goodbye. She just sat there with a puzzled look, not saying a word. In the evening, the florist's boy came to visit her, pounding on the door.

I opened the door a little. "What is it? It's already late."

"Please leave Beatrice behind," the boy replied curtly.

"I can't do that. It's the dead of night. Go home."

"Please. We promised to get married," he insisted.

As an adult, I knew immediately that he was lying. He made a promise to a mute? I gave him a piece of my mind and slammed the door shut.

The night before our departure, I cut Beatrice's long, curly blonde hair. I told her that it would be a nuisance during the voyage, but there was more to it. I believed that her hair was the one attracting men, the glistening curls that looked so much like my sister's. Beatrice quietly obeyed. When her curls fell to the floor, she shed a few tears, but that was it. With her hair shortened, Beatrice's alluring charm vanished, leaving only a pale, skinny figure that looked like a boy's. Relieved that traces of my sister were finally gone, I slept well that night.

The next morning, Beatrice and I left the town I grew up in, carrying one small luggage each. After a long ride to the port town, we finally arrived at the ship. Before we set sail, a large number of boys gathered on the wharf. They had come to say goodbye to Beatrice. But none of them could find her. Her signature golden curls were gone.

When the ship was about to depart, a boy came running along the jetty. Dirty, with freckles. It was the boy from the flower shop. He found Beatrice, even with her hair short, and went straight to her.

The whistle blew.

The ship slowly left the harbor.

"Beatrice, over here!" The boy threw a small burlap sack. "They're edelweiss seeds. It's your favorite flower. You used to look at them all the time when you passed by our shop. I even wished I would turn into an edelweiss. I wanted to be by your side all the time."

His voice was drowned out by the steam whistle.

"This serves as a promise, that we'll never forget each other."

Soon I couldn't hear his voice anymore. Beatrice took the burlap sack and studied it.

The wind blew, and Beatrice staggered a bit.

This is the end of me and my adopted daughter's story in Hamburg. And this is how, mostly by chance, she acquired edelweiss seeds, the source of her wealth.

“Victorique?”

Kazuya lifted his eyes from the book and looked inside the dollhouse. Victorique was lying lazily on the couch, occasionally stretching like a kitten. Her puffy ruffles shifted, forming various intricate patterns.

The squirrel poked its head out of her golden hair and let out a small squeak, as though replying on her behalf.

“I’m listening,” Victorique grumbled. “I am unmistakably awake.”

“Okay, then. I’ll continue.”

“Very well.”

Kazuya straightened his posture and returned his gaze to the book.

“Life in the New World was harsh, but...”

A bird chirped and took off from the flowerbed.

The wind blew, stirring Kazuya’s jet-black hair.

Life in the New World was harsh, but modest and stable. There was a certain sense of satisfaction after a hard days’ work. I lived my days while keeping my faith in God.

There were a few surprises. My adopted daughter Beatrice, who went to school during the day and helped me at home in the evenings, had learned to read and write, and was surprisingly expressive and intelligent. She still couldn’t speak, but she conversed with me through writing. Life with a young, clever girl was exciting and fun. Some time later, I received a marriage proposal from a middle-aged man who had lost his wife on a sea voyage. I assumed he did not fancy me as a woman, and only wanted me to take the role of housewife and mother to his children; in other words, a laborer. It would make life easier, but only for me, and not my stepdaughter. So I turned down the proposal. Raising Beatrice was more important.

Every day I told her about her parents. I kept reminding her to live seriously, so she wouldn’t end up like her mother. Beatrice always listened quietly.

Life was easy, but as a female household, we were poor. One day Beatrice was talking to a traveling merchant in writing. When she came back she took out the small burlap sack and started digging around in the little garden.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m planting flowers,” she responded in writing.

“Flowers don’t fill the stomach. But I suppose they will fill your spirit.”

“That’s not it. I think we can sell them. There’s already wealth inequality in this country, but not a lot of luxury goods. The wives and daughters of rich people living in the big cities are hungry for them. Nice dresses, perfumed oil, jewelry, and beautiful flowers from gentlemen.”

“I see. You might be right.”

Beatrice was working so hard in growing the flowers that I began helping her at night. Day after day, I watered, fertilized, and removed dead leaves. I objected to the idea of fertilizing the flowers when we were barely scraping by, but Beatrice smiled at me and said initial investment was important. The next year, when many yellow flowers covered with white hairs bloomed, a merchant came and bought them at a surprisingly high price. I was delighted, but Beatrice gave me a stern look.

“The merchant will sell it at a much higher price in the city,” she said. “We must secure an efficient distribution channel.”

The next year more flowers bloomed, and with the money she made, Beatrice bought a plot of land next door. The flower garden grew bigger and bigger. Beatrice grew up to be beautiful, but she did not care about men, only her flowers. I was worried that she would miss her chance to get married, but one day she tied the knot with someone—to turn her flower shop into a company called Beatrice’s Yellow Flower Garden. The man she married was a young merchant who came for a visit after hearing rumors about Beatrice’s flowers. I did not feel any love from Beatrice herself. Since women alone could not start a company, her husband helped her. The company grew rapidly in the blink of an eye.

By this time, I came to a realization.

The fears that had tormented me for so long were, in fact, unfounded.

Needless to say, Beatrice took after her shrewd father, not her passionate mother. At this time, she had begun to grow her hair again. Her young husband smiled, saying that it would soon grow back to be waist-long. I thought that even if her long hair regained its lustrous golden color, I wouldn’t see my sister in her ever again. Beatrice wanted a husband, not for love, but to start a company. She planted flowers, not because they were beautiful, but because they could be sold at a high price.



The next few decades flew by. They opened branches all over the New World. On this new, undeveloped land, young men who fell in love would always go to Beatrice's flower shop to buy a bouquet of flowers for their lady. My daughter's flower shop must have brought countless anonymous love to fruition. Beatrice Baran herself, however, was a businesswoman who never fell in love.

I was often asked: What is the secret to her success?

How did she do so well with just a few flower seeds she brought from the Old World?

Beatrice would have had a better answer. But for me, as a witness, the answer was simple.

Are you more like her father or your mother?

Which footsteps will you follow from here on?

That is the essence of this story.

The autumn sunlight falling on the flowerbed maze made the colorful flowers glitter. Whenever the wind blew, their petals swayed like ruffles, before slowly returning to their original stillness.

Kazuya finished reading the book and gently closed it. Victorique slowly rose from the emerald couch, brushing her golden hair back. The squirrel scrambled back onto her head.

Victorique yawned along with the squirrel. "What a passionate fellow."

"Yeah," Kazuya replied. "Wait, who's passionate again?"

Victorique gave Kazuya a tired look.

"Was there a mention of someone passionate?" Kazuya asked. "Who? The author?"

"Beatrice, who else?" Victorique said tediously, holding a pipe in her mouth. "After all, she was reunited with her first love that she had left on the other side of the Atlantic. How would you describe that, if not passionate?" She yawned again.

"First love?" Kazuya muttered.

Victorique gave him a look of disbelief. "I'm talking about the florist boy who gave her the edelweiss seeds."

"What?"

"God, you are so dense. Pumpkin-head. How can you not realize it after reading the story out loud yourself?" She held up her small index finger to

Kazuya. “The boy who worked at a flower shop in Hamburg and the young merchant she met on the New World were the same person. After reuniting with each other, they started a company. Apparently, her aunt, and you, for that matter, never realized the truth.”

“How do you even know that?”

Whenever she wagged her finger, the squirrel on top of her head also swung its body, squeaking.

“The old lady had a few misconceptions about her mute daughter. The boy’s love wasn’t unrequited. They probably loved each other. Her aunt called the boy a liar, saying that he couldn’t possibly make a promise to a girl who couldn’t speak. But there are other ways to make a promise besides orally.”

“I see.” Kazuya nodded.

“The boy probably decided to follow the girl to a distant land. So he entrusted her with the edelweiss seeds. He said they would serve as a promise that they would never forget each other. The girl realized what he really meant by those words. So, in a tiny garden in a corner of the incredibly vast New World, she planted the flower seeds as a sign of their promise.”

“So she didn’t grow edelweiss to sell them?”

“I believe so. The edelweiss flower was a secret landmark that only the two of them could see. Beatrice needed to make her flower garden as big as possible. So she bought a plot of land next door, secured a distribution channel, and created a beacon made of yellow flowers. Beatrice’s yellow flower garden was, in other words, a smoke signal of love that burned in the darkness of the night. The boy became a traveling merchant and went to the vast land of the New World in search of edelweiss—that is, Beatrice. They would have both grown up by then, and their appearance would have changed. Fortunately, Beatrice’s flower garden had become famous. Eventually, the man followed the rumors and found his way to her. The edelweiss flowers reunited them, and they got married.”

“I see,” Kazuya said.

Victorique inclined her head a little. “Beatrice’s husband, whom she supposedly met as an adult, knew that she once had curly blonde hair that reached down to her waist. It’s conclusive proof that the man she married knew her from when they were still in the Old World.”

“And her strict aunt never realized it.”

“Indeed. Her aunt always wondered from whom Beatrice took after, her father or her mother. The answer is most likely her mother. She was quite the passionate person. But for the sake of her aunt’s peace of mind, who raised her with such concern, she must have kept it a secret all her life.”

Victorique blew her pipe softly.

“As though sharing sparks from Beatrice, a myriad of lovers in the New World bought and gifted edelweiss flowers, lighting up the dark night. The flame spread across the continent, and three hundred years later, it’s still illuminating lovers’ nights.”

The squirrel squeaked. It jumped off Victorique’s head, scurried across the window sill, and scrambled back up onto Kazuya’s shoulder.

The wind blew softly.

“Edelweiss signifies remembrance. A long time ago, a boy entrusted the seed of this flower to a ship bound for the New World. It goes without saying that the boy, Beatrice, and her strict aunt are long gone. Humans die, but their memories remain. Like a small flame flickering in the darkness.”

“Yeah.” Kazuya stared at the closed book for a while.

Victorique looked at him curiously. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s just...”





Kazuya thought about the man who must have crossed the sea with great difficulty, arriving at an unfamiliar land too vast to search for a single girl. He couldn't imagine the days he must have spent wandering across this continent with only the image of a single flower to guide him.

To him, she must've been worth all that effort.

Kazuya smiled faintly.

"Oh, no. It's getting dark. I've got to get back," Kazuya said, straightening himself.

Victorique's eyes flickered sadly, which Kazuya noticed. He peered at her face, but she quickly turned her back to him, acting like nothing was wrong.

"Go," she said. "Owls will peck at you if you stay there too long."

"Owls? Why?"

"I've been hearing them a lot at night lately. It must be living somewhere in the garden. Though I would love to see you running around with an owl pecking your head. Now go."

"Just when I thought I saved myself from being gnawed on by rats in prison, this time it's an owl." He sighed. Straightening his back, he tucked the book under his arm. "Bye, Victorique. I'll be back some other time."

"...Right," Victorique replied, a little forlornly.

Putting the squirrel on his shoulder, Kazuya walked straight with a solemn look on his face. He looked over his shoulder in front of the flowerbed and saw Victorique still with her back turned. He smiled softly. Then he disappeared into the maze.

For a while Victorique stayed still. Then, she picked up one of the books on the floor, plopped down on the couch, and began to read. Her green eyes flickered as she leafed through the pages at great speed. She was so immersed in reading that she seemed to have already forgotten about Kazuya.

The flowers in the beds swayed gently in the wind.

The sun was setting, the shadows growing a little longer.

In the candy house, built deep inside a quiet maze of flowerbeds, a pretty bunch of flowers in a vase danced in the wind like a multicolored flame.

Chapter 5: Petals and Owl

We go back in time.

A few days ago, at the beginning of autumn, St. Marguerite Academy.

Autumn was slowly descending like an invisible spirit on the vast, French-garden campus surrounding the huge U-shaped school building. The wind, cool and slightly humid, rustled foliage that were beginning to turn to a yellowish green. Leaves scraping against each other produced musical sounds as though from an instrument.

“The woman opened the window of the carriage and looked outside. She had just passed the cemetery. A hazy moon was the only light in the darkness. And then...”

Like a gust of brisk wind blowing through a dreary landscape, there came a girl’s voice, forcing itself to sound terrifying, though tinged with energy and vigor.

“And then... She saw the owner of the eerie footsteps that passed the carriage.”

In the middle of the girls sitting in a circle on the lawn in various poses was a female student with short blonde hair, blue eyes as clear as the summer skies, and a remarkably bright aura. She dropped her voice low for a horrifying effect. The people around her were her classmates, listening intently to her story, their faces a little scrunched up.

The female student—Avril Bradley—raised her voice.

“She saw... that it belonged to a cow running on two legs!”

The girls shrieked in unison, then giggled and poked each other. Avril nodded in satisfaction and patted the book in her lap, titled ‘Ghost Stories: Volume Three’, with the palm of her hand.

“Now it’s your turn to tell a scary story,” she told the girl sitting next to her.

“I’m not sure I can top what you just shared.”

“Oh, come on. I’m...” Avril trailed off.

She lifted her gaze and looked into the distance. The sun had lowered a bit, and the garden was bathed in rosy dusk. She spotted a small oriental boy emerging from the twilight, walking with his back straight along the gravel path.

“Kujou...”

Avril craned her neck as she watched the boy with jet-black hair and eyes—Kazuya Kujou. Her short blonde hair bobbed in the autumn breeze.

She looked harder so the boy would notice, but Kazuya walked on methodically, oblivious to her gaze. He was holding a bouquet of chic and pretty purple flowers. Avril’s eyes slanted sharply.

“What’s wrong, Avril?” a girl asked.

Avril turned her head. “I-It’s nothing,” she said with a shake of her head. Curious, she turned her eyes back to the path. “Huh?”

Kazuya had vanished in an instant, and there was only a rosy dusk.

“He’s gone!”

“Hmm? Who’s gone?”

Avril shook her head repeatedly. Frowning, she flapped her arms around.

“He was holding flowers...”

The wind blew, rustling the leaves.

The girls resumed telling stories. Avril giggled, toppled back as she laughed, and sometimes glanced toward the direction Kazuya had disappeared to.

There was only a gravel path paved with white pebbles, a tiny bench, and a large flowerbed as tall as an adult. The boy had disappeared completely like magic.

The next day.

It was yet another beautiful day. It was hard not to fall asleep during classes.

Avril was looking out the window, her cheek resting on her palm. Soft sunlight fell on her short blonde hair. She blinked sleepily.

“Hey!” sounded a cute voice.

Avril turned her head back to the classroom and saw Ms. Cecile throwing a piece of chalk. Tracing an arc in the air, it landed on Avril’s head. She blinked.

“Eyes inside, Avril. We’re in the middle of class.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Avril cast her gaze to her textbook. Then, realizing something, she looked at Kazuya, who was sitting diagonally in front of her.

Just like Avril, Kazuya was looking out the window with a melancholic expression on his face until moments ago. It was an unusual behavior from the earnest boy, who always listened to the class more attentively than anyone else.

I wonder what’s wrong? Avril pondered. Is something bothering him? He seems out of it, which is rather unusual. Oh, yeah. He suddenly disappeared yesterday. Hmm... Ah!

She clapped her hands.

Ms. Cecile turned at the sound and saw Avril looking up at the ceiling, lost in thought. She raised another piece of chalk.

“Avril!”

Avril nodded to herself. *When something’s bothering Kujou, it’s either because his father or his brothers are mad at him... And...*

Her face turned grim.

“The Gray Wolf,” she said aloud. “He’s thinking about the Gray Wolf. Argh, I hate her so much! Hmm?”

She felt something fall on her head, so she reached for it. Yet another piece of chalk. She looked at the platform up front. Ms. Cecile, frozen in a throwing pose, was giving her a hard-eyed stare behind her round glasses.

“Avril,” the teacher said. “You’re blanking out, clapping your hands, and mumbling to yourself. I understand that you’re at a sensitive age, but we’re in the middle of class right now.”

“Yes, Ma’am...”

“A student’s duty is to study. When I was your age, I studied every day and was the brightest one in school.”

Ms. Cecile looked a little uneasy. The students did not say anything, but they looked at her suspiciously.

“As such, Ms. Avril,” she said, trying to get rid of the awkward atmosphere. “You will stand in the hallway.”

“What?”

“The teacher’s word is absolute.”

“But Kujou was looking outside too.”

Kazuya, vacantly resting his face on his hand, gave a start. He looked over his shoulder. “What? Me?”

Avril nodded repeatedly, her short blonde hair bobbing up and down each time.

“I’m going to stand in the hallway with Kujou,” she said. “Then I will ask him why he seems so out of it today. Who did he give those flowers to yesterday? He looked so happy. The nerve! And then...”

“Th-There’s more?”

Avril pulled Kazuya’s hand and dashed out to the hallway. The teacher’s eyes flickered in surprise as she heard Kazuya’s downcast voice.

“I’ve never been made to stand in the hallway,” he said. “I-I represent my country. I have the duty to... Ouch! Stop pinching me!”

That evening.

Once again Avril witnessed Kazuya magically disappear from the garden.

“It’s a curse! Mandrakes are cursed root vegetables. It’s used in cursing rituals, and looking at it will get you cursed. It’s a staple of ghost stories.”

“Cursed?!”

“That’s right!”

“Really?”

“Get away from the mandrake!”

“Kyah!”

While Avril was pulling the leaves of what looked like a mandrake, a cursed root vegetable that she and Ms. Cecile had found in the corner of the garden, Kazuya walked by. She called out to him, thinking that even though he was an easygoing kid, a boy should be reliable in times like this, and pulled him over to the mandrake.

As was his habit, Kazuya was as calm as an elderly man.

“It looks like a *daikon*. Or maybe a turnip, or a carrot.”

And then he left. A while later, when Avril pulled out the mandrake with Ms. Cecile, he returned with steady footsteps. While she was throwing the mandrake around, screaming, Kazuya once again disappeared.

“H-He’s gone!”

Just like yesterday, Kazuya vanished near a large flowerbed as tall as an adult.

Avril mulled it over. Dusk was approaching.

“The Gray Wolf,” she concluded. Nodding to herself, she stood up. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but I’m sure the Gray Wolf is behind this. Call it a woman’s intuition. That flowerbed looks suspicious.”

Slowly she approached the flowerbed. It stirred like a living creature, and petals riding the wind struck her face, as though telling her to stay away.

Avril let out a yelp. The damp petals stuck to her cheeks and forehead, feeling cold, then slowly fluttered down her uniform and onto the ground.

Avril raised her head, her lips pursed tight. There was a brave look on her face.

“Hmm...” She thought about it a bit. “Let’s just get in there for now.”

Then, without thinking too much about it, she jumped cheerfully into the pathway between the flowerbeds.

Later...

“Wh-What’s going on?”

After a long and arduous struggle, almost getting lost, Avril staggered back outside, as if pushed by some mysterious force.

The next day. A sunny weekend afternoon.

Avril saw Kazuya disappear in front of the flowerbed again.

And today, he was in high spirits, humming a tune as he walked down the path with a plate of lemon cake and yellow flowers.

Avril rolled up her sleeves. “All right. I already have an idea what’s inside the maze, but I’m gonna investigate anyway. It seems like getting in is not that easy.” She nodded with confidence. “But I’m the granddaughter of the adventurer Sir Bradley! Adventures are my forte. Then again, being fully prepared is a must before embarking on one. I should head back to the dorm first and pack some stuff.”

She dashed enthusiastically toward the girls’ dormitory.

“Adventure essentials, first: food. Second, drinks. Then a map and a flashlight. Also, it might get cold, so a jacket.”

Avril’s room, located on the first floor of the girls’ dormitory, was cluttered with items, thrown upward to the ceiling and falling onto the bed.

A classmate with blonde hair tied into pigtails walking down the corridor stopped in her tracks and peered cautiously into her room.

“What are you doing, Miss Bradley?” she asked.

“Preparing for an adventurer,” Avril replied easily.

“Teach will be all over your case again. Your room is a mess. We’re always reminded to keep our rooms neat and tidy.”

“...Ahuh.”

“I heard Ms. Cecile’s room is always spotless. She said so herself. We should follow her example. That’s a lot of stuff. Where are you going?”

“I’m going on an adventure in the garden. Wait...”

Avril bounced out of her room, carrying a large backpack and a flashlight. It looked like she was planning to climb high up in the Alps. She was holding a map of the village in her other hand.

“I don’t think I need this one, though. It doesn’t have a map of the garden itself.”

She threw the map on the bed and bounded down the hallway.

“An adventure?” the girl said curiously. “That is not something a lady does. You are an odd one, Miss Bradley.”

“How rude. I’m not odd, I’m extraordinary. I have my grandfather’s adventurer’s spirit in me.”

“What?” The girl watched Avril go, bewildered. “Ah!” She trotted after her. “Is your grandfather perhaps the adventurer Sir Bradley?”

“What, you didn’t know that?”

“The one who disappeared in a balloon ride?”

Avril’s face darkened a bit. “Yes.”

“I can’t believe it.”

Avril turned to the girl. “I’ll have you know, my grandpa was a fine gentleman, a brave adventurer, and a fighter who kept attempting the impossible,” she argued. “Sure, he met a tragic end, but still...”

The girl’s cheeks had turned a rosy red as she stared at Avril.

“...What is it?” Avril asked.

“I can’t believe it!”

“Hmm?”

“I’m a big fan of Sir Bradley! You don’t know? He’s very popular with the ladies of Sauville.”

“R-Really...” Avril was taken aback.

“Please share stories about your grandfather sometime.”

“S-Sure.”

She took out a piece of chocolate she had in her pocket as emergency ration and took a bite, then left the dormitory.

The sun had long since set, and the darkness of night was beginning to shroud the garden. Soft moonlight was falling on the gravel path. Students were in their respective rooms, studying, doing whatever they wanted. Cool water trickled down the fountain. Feeling all alone, Avril hurried to the flowerbed.

The flowerbed maze loomed high as it always did, looking down at Avril. An owl hooted. Clouds drifted by, veiling the moon. For a moment, darkness enveloped the area.

Avril’s ears caught a sound. A girl’s indistinct whisper. A dark, resentful murmur. Yet somehow sweet. Soft as a sigh.

The presence of a human being.

It was probably the truly extraordinary, shining golden girl hiding inside the maze. Fear gripped Avril. But she gritted her teeth and took a step forward.

A chilly, damp wind blew.

Petals stirred and blew against Avril like colorful scraps, stopping her proceeding. The clouds slid away, allowing moonlight to pierce the darkness once more. A pale orb in the night sky. Avril shivered. She brushed off the damp, slightly smelly petals from her face with her right hand, and then raised a flashlight in her left.

The flowerbed maze was shadowy, as though darkness itself had opened its jet-black mouth.

Flowers stirred in all directions with every gust of the wind, as if mocking Avril. The air was thick with the girl’s presence, like damp and sickly flowers.

“Okay, here we go.” Avril nodded determinedly.

An owl hooted again.

She started walking.

The darkness quickly swallowed her long and graceful figure.

An hour later...

“I-I lost my way again!”

Avril stood dumbfounded, flashlight in hand.

The huge maze turned into an even bigger puzzle at this time of night, when darkness had encroached, tormenting those who were lost inside. A familiar path. Familiar flowers. The direction of the moonlight was the only thing she could rely on, but even the clouds blotted out the moon, plunging the area in darkness. Then she got more lost, and by the time the moon showed itself again, she found herself in an unexpected spot.

“What’s going on?!” Avril shouted into the night sky. Tears formed in her clear blue eyes. “I’m lost.”

The complex shape of the flowerbed maze gave the feeling of wandering into the body of a gigantic beast. The intricate, narrow passageways were like intestines surrounded by flowers, the musty smell bringing to mind animals that had eaten flowers for a meal. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted. The next moment, a hoot came from nearby. Avril shuddered.

Sounds like its wings are huge. Must be a huge owl.

Gripped by fear, Avril lowered her stuff.

Hopefully, I’ll be fine. I think we learned in class that owls are carnivorous... Surely, there’s no problem.

Setting her flashlight down for now, she decided to eat some emergency ration to cheer herself up. She took out a piece of chocolate and munched on it. The clouds drifted away, revealing the moon. Soft light touched Avril.

Blooming red, white, and pink flowers surrounded her. Something drew Avril’s attention. She gasped, staring at a spot in the flowerbed. A lone, bright-red daisy was standing there.

As she studied it, the chocolate fell out of her hand.

“Oh...” Her face turned somber, and tears formed in the corner of her eyes. “Hmm...”

As Avril stood there staring at the daisy in the flowerbed, someone came trotting down the path.

Small footsteps. Black shoes covered with black pearl ornaments. A magical, luxurious dress of blue velvet overlaid with delicate French-knitted black lace.

Under the moonlight, the figure stood out like a phantom in the night.

Her golden hair, like an unfurled silk turban, hung down to her ankles, swaying softly as she walked. It seemed like the tail of some ancient

creature. Her dark, green eyes were half-hidden by the black silk lace hanging from her small blue hat.

The porcelain doll stopped when she saw a girl in uniform staring at the flowerbeds.

She watched her eerily for a while, then in an indifferent voice said, “Suspicious person. What are you doing there?”

Avril, pensive, glanced at her. “Oh, Victorique.” Her mind seemed to be somewhere else. “I was just thinking.”

“Thinking? Here?”

“Yeah... Do you want some chocolate?”

Avril took a piece of chocolate out of her pocket and offered it to her.

“No, thank you,” the lovely girl—Victorique—huffed.

“Hmm...”

“Farewell.” Victorique turned to leave.

“Ah!” Avril snapped back to her senses and stopped her. “Wait a minute!”

“...What is it?”

“Don’t give me that. I was right. I knew your house was in here. I thought for sure that was the case. Kujou comes here every day, after all. I was right!”

“So loud. Who are you again?” she asked nonchalantly. “An acquaintance of mine?”

“What did you say?! How can you forget that easily? Sure, you might not care about me, but still. It’s me, farting new—I mean, don’t call me that again. It’s Avril. Avril Bradley.”

“Oh.” Victorique clapped her small hands together. “Are you related to Sir Bradley?”

“Yup. He was my grandfather. I love him,” Avril replied briskly. Then, her voice softened. “I was just told that he’s very popular with the ladies of Sauville. Even you, who forgets about me after taking three steps, remember my grandfather, huh?”

“Ahuh. Well, then.”

Losing interest, Victorique took her eyes off Avril and tottered away. Avril tried to stop her quick. As things were, she would not be able to solve the mystery of the flowerbed, and she was not even sure if she could return

to the dormitory before lights out. She was currently lost in a huge maze resembling the inside of a beast that had eaten flowers for dinner.

Before she could call her name, Victorique herself looked back at her, which was rather unusual. She was regarding Avril with a questioning look, her golden hair stirring.

“You...”

“What? Yes, as you can see, I’m lost.”

“I don’t care about that. You looked sad earlier. Why?”

Caught off-guard, Avril fell silent. Then slowly, she turned her gaze back to the spot she was staring at earlier.

“Because...”

Victorique marched back to her, her blue velvet dress swaying, and followed her gaze. Her green eyes, like a spirit’s that had been around since time immemorial, narrowed a little.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes.” Avril nodded. Tears in her eyes, she pointed to a black caterpillar cutting a hole on a leaf of a pretty daisy. “A caterpillar,” she said gravely.

“A caterpillar made you sad? You’re an amusing one, farting newt.”

“No, I’m not! It’s not that. I saw this caterpillar, and it reminded me of something. I know, maybe you can give me an answer. It’s about my late aunt. Her name was Daisy.”

Victorique snorted faintly. “Daisy, huh? Not a bad name. It has a virtuous ring to it.”

“Indeed. Daisy was the wife of Sir Bradley Jr., the eldest son of Sir Bradley the Adventurer. Junior was my uncle. To tell this story, I must talk about bugs. His life truly began in the year 1901. When he was 20 years old, he saw a bug.”

Gentle moonlight fell on the flowerbed maze, Avril pointing at the caterpillar, and Victorique, looking up at the void with cold eyes, seemingly uninterested.

Sir Bradley Jr., the son of fighter and grand British adventurer Sir Bradley, the pride of England, unsurprisingly, spent all his life trying to surpass his father. In that sense, one might consider Junior to be a true fighter himself, but his battle had a futile and fruitless side to it.

“Pops finished school. In that case, I’m gonna make it big without finishing!”

He left a prestigious boarding school at the age of seventeen for that reason alone. His father was on an adventure trip to the Dark Continent of Africa at the time, so his mother beat him with a frying pan, chasing him around the kitchen and garden. Not letting go of the kitchen utensil, his mother forced him to enroll in a different school.

“My dad is an English gentleman. In that case...”

Then he started hanging out with the town’s delinquents, so his mother chased him around town with a whip. His strict mother was now a gentle and sophisticated old widow, living leisurely in her villa by the Mediterranean Sea, but that’s a story for another time.

Anyway, Sir Bradley Jr. did a lot of crazy things just to surpass his father, and by the time he turned twenty, he was known among Londoners as ‘Sir Bradley’s stupid son’. He and his mother became featured in the newspaper’s comics’ section, depicting him causing trouble and his mother chasing him around. There were even bets placed in pubs and social clubs on what he would do next.

But Junior, however, was more than just a stupid son, for his idiocy beggared even the imagination.

“Are you supposed to be bragging about your relative? A weird way to do it, then,” Victorique, glancing at Avril, mumbled tiredly.

The wind blew through the night-shrouded flowerbed maze.

Sitting on the edge of the flowerbed, Victorique, with the elegant motion of a gentlewoman, was waving a blue fan adorned with black plume. With every wave of the fan, her hair fluttered in the faint breeze. Her green eyes, glittering like jewels, were narrowed in boredom.

“I-It’s not weird. My uncle is awesome.”

“Really, now?”

“Yup. I’m just getting to the good part.”

Avril pointed to the caterpillar, which was wriggling as it munched on a daisy leaf.

“What’s wrong with the caterpillar?” Victorique asked.

“My uncle had a lot of doubts when he was a teenager because of his father, but he eventually found his calling. All because of a bug.”

“Hmm...”

Avril resumed talking, and Victorique reluctantly listened, waving her fan.

Clouds rolled in, and the moon dimmed.

Avril’s voice rose.

Sir Bradley Jr., the most foolish son in London, raced to the harbor on his twentieth birthday in 1901 without his mother’s knowledge. What was he going to do? The answer was: board a ship. To become an adventurer? To travel? Neither. Junior wanted to be a sailor. This decision was beyond what Londoners in bars and the cynical English gentlemen could have imagined. No one saw it coming.

Junior had a childhood sweetheart named Daisy Bell, whom he was engaged with since they were fifteen. He used to sing her name while giving her a bouquet of bright-red daisies. Daisy was a sickly but sweet little girl with honey-colored hair and round eyes. So when Junior told her he was going to be a sailor that day, she was dumbfounded, standing on the wharf with her mouth hanging open. Boarding a ship bound for South America as a grunt, Junior shouted that he would be back in about five years.

But the moment they set sail, Junior jumped off the deck of the ship, swam across the waters, and returned to the shores of England.

“Wh-What’s the matter?” Daisy asked, surprised for the second time now.

“I changed my mind about being a sailor. I want to be way more awesome than my dad. So I’m going to dig a tunnel under London!”

Upon hearing this, Daisy fainted.

When Junior boarded the ship bound for South America, he saw a shipworm that made tiny holes in the vessel. The sight of the worm, with its long, thin body wriggling around as it made holes, gave Junior an idea.

At that time, railway tracks were being built left and right, and people started talking about the possibility of digging underground tunnels to build railway lines in cities with high population density. However, the technology for digging tunnels had not yet been established.

Junior had always done well academically. He was not good at memorization, which required a lot of effort, but he was insightful. And so,

Junior caught Daisy with one arm and wrote down the idea that came to him with the other. Then, with Daisy on his back, he pranced into a railroad company.

His idea was quickly adopted. When he announced that he was developing a tunneling machine that would mimic the movement of a shipworm, the newspapers jumped on it, as it was the work of Junior, a celebrity. A subway train, a new-age vehicle developed by an eccentric young man, was all the talk in high society, and the fundraising was going well. While all of that was going on, Junior decided to marry the lovely Daisy. His father was away on an adventure to the North Pole, but he congratulated his son and daughter-in-law by flying a flock of pigeons into the church with the message, "I wish you all the best."

After getting married, Junior was busy, scrambling west and east to get the tunnel open. Daisy gave birth to and raised their daughter, Frannie, while her husband was away most of the time. Junior no longer gave his wife bouquets of daisies or jokingly sang her name. He was too busy running around, the shadow of his great father always on his mind. At last, the construction of the tunnel in London began. But something unexpected was waiting to happen.

There was a cave-in during construction, and the project was halted. The newspapers and the London high society that used to sing Junior's praises suddenly turned their backs on him. Instead of surpassing his great father, he had brought shame to the family name. Disgrace and a huge debt burdened him. While he was struggling to make ends meet, the sickly Daisy fell ill. She passed away shortly after, promising that she would be there when his dreams came true.

After his wife's death, Junior fell into despair. But even though the whole of England had turned its back on him, his family remained. Junior's brother, Avril's father, looked after him, while his daughter Frannie went to boarding school. After a while, Rennie, sister of the late Daisy, came to the house to be a housekeeper, since Junior was still unable to take care of things. Rennie was the opposite of her sister Daisy. A large, stern-faced woman who did not smile much, she did the housework and provided nutritious meals. The house was filled with gloom, occupied only by an irritated Rennie and a man crying "Daisy, daisy," all day and night. When

the great Sir Bradley disappeared somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean in a balloon, Junior sank even deeper into the pits of despair.

But ten years later, after many twists and turns, the tunnel was finally completed, and Junior's honor was successfully restored. A ceremony was held in London, with the members of Sir Bradley's family all invited.

Avril finished her story.

"The ceremony was a few days ago," she said.

Moonlight shone once more, illuminating Avril's blooming face. Victorique, sitting beside her and fanning her face, looked up at her, a little exasperated.

"Ahuh."

"Right at the end of summer break, I attended the ceremony with my grandmother, the same woman famous among Londoners for chasing around her son with a frying pan."

Avril pulled a newspaper out of her things. The headline read, '**Sir Bradley Junior Finally Completes London's Underground Railway!**' Upon opening it, there was a picture of ladies and gentlemen lined up in what appeared to be a tunnel.

"This right here is my uncle. This is my Aunt Rennie. This is his daughter Frannie, my cousin. Look, I'm right here too!"

Junior was wearing a tailcoat. The lady standing beside him was as Avril described, a large woman with a stern face. She was wearing a puffy, old-fashioned dress that reached all the way to her ankles. Avril and Frannie were dressed in simple blouses and knee-length skirts. Her grandmother, too, was dressed modestly.

Pointing to the photo, Avril lowered her voice. "Actually, something happened during the ceremony." Her voice dropped even lower, down to an eerie level. "Aunt Daisy's ghost appeared!"

"No, she didn't," Victorique denied.

"She did," Avril insisted, taken aback.

"No, she did not," Victorique denied once more, with confidence.

Avril pouted. "And how do you know that?"

"Because there is no such thing as ghosts."

"There is!" Avril stamped her foot. "That is one thing I'll never concede. Ghosts are real. They definitely exist."

“What a petulant child. Talk to me, then.”

“You’re a child yourself! Fine. Listen very carefully. It happened right after this photo was taken.”

Avril rolled up her sleeves.

Despite the absence of wind, flowers scattered petals in the air, falling to the ground and stirring as though alive.

Junior was beaming during the gorgeous ceremony, but Avril thought that her uncle was feeling a little down. She and her cousin Frannie were talking about going shopping since they were in London, when she heard Junior mumbling sadly, “Daisy, oh Daisy.”

I knew it. Uncle’s thinking about Aunt Daisy. She prayed fervently for the tunnel’s success, but passed away of an illness a long time ago.

“Daisy. Oh, Daisy!”

Junior’s tone changed. Curious, Avril looked over her shoulder. She sensed surprise on top of the sorrow.

Then, everyone’s breath caught, including Avril’s and Frannie’s.

Deep inside the tunnel, like a light shining in the darkness, were bright-red daisy flowers, scattered all over the place. As though saying, “I’m right here.”

“I’ll be by your side when your dreams come true.”

Junior stood there stunned for a while. Then, he tottered over and picked up the daisies one by one. Holding the flowers to his chest, he fell to his knees.

“Daisy, I’m sorry it took so long. I was so focused on surpassing my father that I ignored everything else. I was a stupid son, but you stayed with me the whole time.”

Avril and Frannie joined hands, shivering. Avril’s aunt and grandmother were hugging each other.

The wind howled inside the tunnel, as though announcing the presence of something not-of-this-world. The temperature seemed to have dropped. Everyone was frozen still, and none uttered a word.

I’m here...

Over here too...

Daisy, daisy...

“They must’ve been very close,” Victorique said.

Avril’s mind was spaced out after telling her story.

“Who?” she asked eventually.

“Daisy and Rennie.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure. Aunt Daisy died when I was young, so I don’t really know. But I think they played a lot together when they were kids. Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? Daisy’s sister was the ghost.”

“What?” Avril cocked her head, baffled. She was holding her half-eaten chocolate.

Victorique looked astounded. “It was most likely Rennie who scattered the flowers in the tunnel. She stuck by her sister’s husband for a long time to fulfill Daisy’s promise to be there when his dreams came true. But it was taking a little too long, which left her irritated.”

“H-How do you know that?”

Victorique frowned. “Through a simple process of elimination,” she said tiredly. “First of all, there is no such thing as ghosts. Then someone has to be the culprit. The photo showed that your aunt is the only one in the family who could have entered the tunnel while hiding a bunch of flowers. Men were dressed in tight-fitting tailcoats and most of the women wore simple skirts. Only your aunt was wearing an extravagant, puffy dress. She brought in a lot of flowers secretly by hiding them under her dress, then scattered them in the tunnel unnoticed. Look.” She pointed to a section of the photo. “Your Aunt Rennie has a weird-looking tail.”

Avril studied the photo. “Ah!” A flower was peeking out from the bottom of her dress. “You’re right! Oh, Auntie. Looking so deadly serious while hiding a bunch of flowers. I didn’t even notice! Darn it. Frannie and I were squealing because we thought it was a ghost.” She sounded disappointed for some reason.

Victorique nodded, slowly, languidly. “She must be a kind-hearted person.”

“I suppose you’re right. Ever since I was a child, I always found her scary. It’s why I never took a liking to her. Aunt Daisy looks so much nicer in the pictures. I guess I can try talking to her next time we meet.” Avril nibbled on her chocolate. “Oh, yeah. I heard that after this incident, my uncle and Aunt Rennie got a lot closer. Frannie found it odd.”

“Your uncle probably realized who brought the flowers. They weren’t staying under the same roof because they were good friends, but because of their love for the same person. An odd relationship, to be sure.”

“Is that even possible?” Avril asked uneasily, perplexed.

“Who knows?” Victorique stood up.

A cold autumn wind blew, and Avril closed her eyes. Flowers shook wildly, their petals squirming like flood, creating a tiny tornado.

Victorique’s magnificent golden hair billowed up, and her green eyes gleamed coldly. Moonlight shone darkly on her blue velvet dress.

“It’s a difficult subject for kids to understand,” Victorique mumbled.

Buffeted by the wind, Avril kept closing and opening her eyes. “What are you on about? You’re a kid yourself.”

“Good question.”

Her voice just now—no, her voice the whole time did not have the same huskiness that it always did. It was clear, low, and soft.

“Vi...” Avril closed her eyes. “Victorique?”

There was no reply.

Opening her eyes, she saw Victorique, her blue velvet flaring like a cloak, about to leave. The wind died down, and Avril rushed after her, flicking petals off the flowers as she went.

“Wait, Victorique!”

Avril caught up to Victorique and tried to step on the hem of her dress with her legs, which were long and slender as an antelope’s. She thought the girl would fall face-flat on the ground and cry about the pain. But her plan failed.

Sensing Avril’s presence, Victorique nimbly dodged and resumed walking about two steps ahead.

Huh? Avril put her foot forward.

Victorique dodged easily once more. More agile than usual, Victorique trotted away, turned a corner of the flowerbed and disappeared.

“I said wait!” Avril called. “You’re acting kind of strange tonight...”

She turned the corner and froze, astonished.

It was a dead end. There were flowerbeds in front, to the right, and to the left. And yet, Victorique’s figure had vanished like a phantom.

Avril was flabbergasted.

An owl hooted nearby.

“V-Victorique?” Avril shuddered. “That was her just now, wasn’t it?”

Moonlight illuminated the empty dead-end.

“She felt like a ghost. She just disappeared with the wind.”

Terrified, Avril retreated a few steps.

The owl hooted again.

Clouds hid the moon, and the night sky turned darker.

Epilogue

That night...

The damp autumn wind that had arrived instantly and taken over the school was blowing through a black veil of darkness, battering against the old stone walls of the library tower, and turning into a small dark tornado. The trees in the gardens were shrouded in shadows, their dewy foliage gleaming darkly.

A large owl with glasslike eyes flew out of the woods, across the lawn, and leisurely passed over the flowerbed maze, its round, feathery body illuminated by the pale moon. From the dark sky above, the maze, with its complex geometric design, seemed to the owl's glasslike eyes a strange sight not found in the natural world. The creature let out a short and deep cry, as though in awe of the complexity of man's creation.

From a small, two-story special dormitory in the middle of the flowerbed maze, a tiny river of molten gold appeared—magnificent, long golden hair that fluttered in the night breeze, hanging down the pale face of a small girl. The owl swooped down and landed in a corner of the flowerbeds near the girl's window.

The girl—Victorique—was sitting by the window, dressed in a white lace bonnet and a ruffled white dress. She looked outside, her mysterious green eyes glinting, even though the human eye could not possibly see through the darkness of night.

"An owl again," she mumbled. "Every single night."

The owl hooted briefly in response.

Victorique was staring at the pretty flowers in the glass sitting on the table, even resting her cheeks on her palms, as though she never grew tired of looking at them. But her small and beautiful face remained cool, with no emotion.

She got up, changed the water in the glass, and gently set it down on the table again. She reached for a book and opened it. With a white ceramic pipe in her hand, she began reading. Her gaze sometimes darted to the

flowers. There seemed to be a slight change in her expression, but it was hard to tell.

Her glossy, cherry lips parted. “It’s the usual night.”

Puffing her pipe, she flipped through her book.

The owl hooted briefly and took off into the darkness of the night.

In the common room of the staff dormitory’s first floor, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair and round glasses over droopy eyes—Ms. Cecile—and a sexy, red-haired, freckled woman—the dorm mother Sophie—were laughing together while stuffing themselves with lemon cake.

“Cecile, you little...”

“Your impression of the headmaster is spot-on!”

“Ah, Sophie, is the bread done? Oh, it’s fresh. Give me one.

Scrumptious!”

“And the chairman too! You’re a natural at this.”

“Oh, yeah. Things are starting to get wild. Let’s sing, Sophie!”

“All right!”

They stood up, flicking the crumbs from their lap onto the floor. Cecile sat down at the grand piano, rolled her shoulders, and began to play a jaunty Charleston piece. Sophie, flapping the bottom of her skirt, started dancing.

And they sang in unison.

“We are poor.

But we love each other.

We can’t afford a lavish wedding because we don’t have the money.

But you look lovely nonetheless. Riding your bike, smiling, eating your food.

You will always look wonderful.

We’re getting married tomorrow. Yahoo!”

“Yahoo!”

“Cecile! Sophie!”

The headmaster’s angry voice rose from afar. Cecile and Sophie exchanged looks, their faces twisting into identical grimaces. They closed the lid of the piano with incredible speed, put the tray of lemon cake on their heads, and jumped out the window like two puppies.

The headmaster entered the room, face red with anger. “Do you know what time it is?! You little... Students are in their rooms studying, while

you're both... Huh? Cecile? Sophie?" He looked around.

The large common room was empty and completely silent. The headmaster stood frozen for a moment, dumbfounded, and then glanced at the lemon cake crumbs on the floor and the white curtains swaying by the open window.

"Good grief." The headmaster heaved a deep sigh. "I thought they'd settle down a bit when they grew older, but they're still the same."

As he moved to close the window, he heard the deep, reverberating hooting of an owl that just took off. Outside, the pale moon was faintly illuminating the school's vast campus.

In one of the rooms in the boys' dormitory, an oriental boy with jet-black hair and eyes—Kazuya Kujou—was facing a large mahogany desk, studying diligently by himself.

From time to time, his long bangs stirred softly in the wind blowing through the open window.

"I've mastered both French and English. I'm all good now. I can keep up with my studies."

Talking to himself, he flipped through his textbook. He was wearing an earnest face, keeping his back straight.

"But I'm still behind on Latin. There's so much to learn." Worried, he cast his eyes down. "No, no, no, I represent my country. I must study hard and become a fine man. Let's do this!"

He turned his attention back to the textbook.

The wind blew.

A while later, while running his pen across his notebook with his right hand without rest, he mumbled, "I want to see Ruri." He flipped through his textbook. "I wonder if she'll get married while I'm here. To a man with a square face shaped like a *geta*. That would be sad. No, wait." He shook his head, his jet-black hair dancing. "Whether she gets married, or become a strict teacher, my sister will still be my sister. Maybe I should write her a letter. It's been a while."

Flip.

"Once I'm done with prepping for Latin, I'll write her a letter."

Wings rustled outside the window, and Kazuya looked up in surprise.

He rose and peered out the French window to see the darkness outside.
He smiled.

“Just an owl.”

Softly he closed the window.

Avril had just emerged from the exit of the flowerbed maze, with a large bundle of her stuff.

She was covered in flowers that scattered whenever the wind blew, red, pink and yellow petals clinging all over her. Avril, now a colorful figure, wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“Phew, I finally made it out.” She was breathing heavily. “I made the right decision to bring emergency rations. I thought I’d never make it out... Huh?”

She heard the flapping of wings, and she looked up at the sky.

Just then, an owl with its wings spread out wide passed overhead between her and the moon high above. Avril squinted at the large silhouette.

“An owl...”

Before she took a step, she looked back. Surveyed her surroundings.

The gardens had sunk into the darkness of the night, every corner wrapped in shadows. The fountain produced eerie sounds, and the grass was wet with dew. Sensing something in the darkness, Avril swallowed.

“Speaking of which, Victorique was acting a little strange. She was quick, and then disappeared when she turned a corner. Victorique the flower ghost in the darkness of the night.”

She looked up at the night sky.

The owl hooted loudly nearby.

“I was sure it was an intruder, what with her huge luggage,” Cordelia muttered.

She was sitting on a thick branch of a sturdy oak, swinging her small feet, which were enclosed in black shoes adorned with black pearls.

She possessed similar awe-inspiring, beautiful features as her daughter Victorique. Her blue eyes seemed slightly darker, but this might be due to the fact that she was blending into the darkness of the night. Her magical, luxurious dress of blue velvet overlaid with delicate French lace fluttered in

the damp autumn wind. Her golden hair hung down from the branches like a muddy stream of gold, stirring as if it had a will of its own.

She was quietly watching the vast grounds of St. Marguerite Academy through the thin, black silk lace that hung from her small blue hat.

“Who’s the weird girl?” asked the man standing next to her.

He was tall, with a mane of bright-red hair, currently tied back. His black coat flared like a mantle in the night breeze, and his upturned blue eyes flickered coldly.

He kicked a branch with the tip of his black boots, causing numerous leaves to scatter down over Avril’s head as she was about to saunter away. Brows knitted in fear, she looked over her shoulder.

“Her friend, probably. Not something I expected, though,” Cordelia replied in a clear voice.

The red-haired man next to her—Brian Roscoe—laughed dryly. “A Gray Wolf can’t possibly have friends.”

“You should know better than to lump her together with the other Gray Wolves, Brian. That’s my daughter.”

Brian’s face contorted. “She’s a girl born from you and a nobleman of this country. A shoddy Gray Wolf, if you will. She has blood that should not be in her veins.”

“No. She represents a new possibility,” Cordelia declared firmly.

Brian opened his mouth to say something, but closed it when he changed his mind. Then, he casually took out a small red box from his coat pocket and showed it to Cordelia.

“After a decade of trying to get this back, the Ministry of the Occult and the Academy of Science are still at each other’s throats.”

“It would seem so.”

“In that case, we’re still safe.”

Brian leapt onto the branch of an adjacent tree with surprising ease. Watching him, Cordelia’s expression changed slightly. She followed him, leaping from tree to tree with the grace of a blue velvet breeze.

From one tree to the next. Down to up. Light as a bird.

“Soon, my daughter will find herself involved in something else,” Cordelia uttered. “The days of peace won’t last long.”

“So you were worried and came to check on her. Hmph. Good on you, I guess.” Brian shrugged.

“Do you remember Coco?”

“Coco? Oh, you mean Coco Rose.”

Brian looked over his shoulder and grinned, a grin that held a bizarre eeriness, like a predator opening its mouth. The moon disappeared behind the clouds, and the darkness of the night shrouded them both. Only their voices echoed in the shadows.

“I do,” Brian added. “She was a lovely queen. She came to Sauville from a faraway land and was very popular with the people, along with Charles de Gilet. I believe she was called the Blue Rose of Sauville. Lovely Coco Rose, with her golden hair and blue eyes. She was like a small rose.”

“But the uneasiness of being royalty led her into the occult. She also had a strong connection with the alchemist Leviathan, who lurked in the clock tower of this academy. The pretty, always anxious, little rose of Sauville. Do you remember how she died?”

“How could I forget? That mystery remains unsolved to this day. There was the whole mess with the Great War, and even Coco’s last years were riddled with the occult. If I recall correctly, she was found dead in the royal palace, and at about the same time, a part of her body was found in a country house far away in the sticks.”

“That’s right.”

“What about it? Either way, it happened a long time ago. It was a royal scandal, to be sure, but it’s long since been unsolved.”

“Yeah.”

“So what kind of mess are you afraid your little pup would get into?”

“...”

“Are you serious?”

“The Ministry of the Occult wants to solve the mystery of Coco Rose’s murder, so they could have dirt on a certain someone. If there’s anyone the Ministry of the Occult would use, it’s my daughter. A Gray Wolf, the last and most powerful brain in Europe.”

“Who’s Albert’s suspect? He thinks the person he wants to get dirt on is the murderer, right?”

“A big shot.”

“... You’re kidding.”

The wind rose, the clouds slowly drifted away, and the moon began to reappear.

Avril, walking along the gravel path toward the girls' dormitory, suddenly turned around with an anxious look on her face. A dazzling moon sat up high.

"Is anyone there?" she called with a trembling voice, glancing around.

There was no answer.

The clouds drifted away, and the pale moon lit up the night-shrouded garden darkly. Wings rustled loudly, and she spotted an owl fly away from the tree tops, hooting.

"Oh. Just an owl."

Avril resumed walking.

The moon shone on the gardens. A damp autumn wind blew through the black veil of darkness, shaking the trees and stirring the dew on the grass.

GosickS - Volume 03

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